The Times of Russian Heroes

Through the Pages of Epics

Lev Prozorov

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BOOKS

Did you know that genuine Russian bogatyrs bear no resemblance whatsoever to those embellished, gilded images that appear in modern ‘politically correct’ retellings, – the real bogatyrs hacked their defeated enemies to pieces and made drinking bowls from human skulls, committed ritual suicide and buried the fallen according to pagan rites, fought against Attila’s hordes and traced their lineage back to ancient Scythian roots. These were not the ‘Christ-loving warriors’ that the Church sought to portray them as, but fearsome sorcerers of war, titans, werewolves and demigods, the last heroes of the Aryan pantheon, heirs to the great pagan era when the Russian people argued with the gods as equals, held the Heavens upon their mighty shoulders and bowed their knees to no one!

This book offers a fresh perspective on the heroic past of Rus’, a sensational reinterpretation of the Russian bylinas. It provides irrefutable proof of their pagan origins and unravels ancient codes and secret allegories.

- Lev Prozorov
  - Introduction
    - Part One
      - Chapter 1
      - Chapter 2
      - Chapter 3
      - Chapter 4
      - Chapter 5
    - Part Two
      - Chapter 1
      - Chapter 2
      - Chapter 3
      - Chapter 4
      - Chapter 5
      - Chapter 6

- 1. Svet-Slavich. The Ruler as a descendantof the heroic progenitor
- 2. Red Sun. The semantics of the title
- 3. The immutability of the lords. The ruler as the embodiment of the sacred Centre
- 4. Princess Aprakseya. Marriage to the Earth and Authority
  - Earth – Authority – Woman
  - Aprakseya and Ilya – initiation as leaders
  - Aprakseya and Kasyan – Power and the Magus
- 5. ‘And yet you, kings and princes, are neither beaten nor executed.’ The motif of the inviolability of the priest-ruler

Part Three

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10

Conclusion

List of sources and references

- Sources:
- Bibliography:

Appendix I

- The Village Gods of ‘Orthodox’ Rus’
- Literature consulted

Appendix II

Notes

1
2
3
4
5
6

Lev Prozorov:
Bogatyr Rus'
Pagan Titans and Demigods

With gratitude to:
To the heroes and bards of the Russian epics.
I.Y. Froyanov, Y.I. Yudin, S.N. Azbelev – to those who carried on the legacy.

To my Aprakseya – perhaps we shall meet again…

Introduction

Perhaps, dear reader, you were surprised by the subtitle of this book. What secrets could there possibly be in the Russian epic, in the tales of Ilya Muromets and Alyosha Popovich? After all, we have been familiar with all this since childhood; it has been reproduced in dozens, if not hundreds, of books, films, cartoons – and so on, right down to jokes. Jokes have been particularly fortunate – few people can actually recall the plot of even a single bylina about Ilya Muromets, whereas any schoolchild can tell a couple of jokes on a theme such as 'once upon a time, the bogatyrs had a row with the musketeers'.

Well, all right, the author of these lines will concede that he is prepared to believe the epics are well known to everyone… but let's check it out anyway, dear reader. Let's take the epic about Volga Vseslavich and Mikula Selyaninovich. It is a very famous epic, featured in almost every anthology, and is even included in the school curriculum. Yes, yes, the one about how Prince Volga was once travelling with his retinue and met an extraordinary ploughman…

Now then, reader, describe them to me. How did Volga and Mikula—the prince and the ploughman—appear in the epic?

I'm almost certain, reader, that if you've taken on this task, you'll describe them something like this: Mikula Selyaninovich, with his hair loose, perhaps even barefoot, in a white shirt and canvas trousers – and beside him, the prince clad in chain mail and wearing a pointed helmet. All of that is true. This is precisely how the scene is depicted in the illustrations by Bilibin, Arkhipov, Kibrite, Pertsov or Losev, in the paintings by Nikolai Roerich, Konstantin Vasilyev and Alexander Klimenko, and in the lacquer miniatures by the Palekh masters. All of that is true – and all of it is completely incorrect. This is what a ploughman – an 'oratai' – looks like in the epic:

> The oratay has a chestnut mare,
> His harness is of silk, The oratay's
> plough beam is of maple, The
> coulters on the plough beam are of
> damask steel,
> A silver clamp on the yoke,
> And the little horn on the yoke is bright gold,

And the oratay's curls sway,
As if pearls were scattering as he gallops,
The ploughman's eyes are as clear as a
falcon's,
And his eyebrows are as black as
sable; The plough horse's boots are
of green morocco leather:
So sharp as an awl, so sharp are his
noses, A sparrow could fly right
under his heel, You could roll an egg
right past his nose;
The young man's hat is made of down,
And his little caftan is of black velvet.

That's not all, reader; in other versions, the ploughman is also said to be wearing a sable fur coat. A strange ploughman, isn't he? Or perhaps the storytellers—Russian villagers from the century before last—didn't know what a ploughman looked like, which, you must admit, is doubtful. Or perhaps this ploughman is, shall we say, very unusual.

And what of Volga? Do you remember the episode where he tries in vain to catch up with Mikula, who is riding a 'wild mare'?

There, Volga started shouting, and he kept
waving his kolpak about.

But there's no mystery here at all – just try spending a few hours, even on horseback and in not-too-intense heat, wearing iron chainmail and a helmet with a visor. Fortunately, with the abundance of historical fencing clubs in our country, this is no longer a problem. You'll immediately appreciate the value of those films, paintings and books where warriors never part with their full armour for a single moment. It's therefore quite natural that the prince rode to collect the tribute, to put it in modern terms, 'dressed in civilian clothes'. And on his head he wore a cap,
a 'kolpak', rather than the pointed steel helmet in which generations of artists depicted the werewolf prince.

As you can see, reader, even an epic that seems to be so familiar from childhood—one that is, after all, part of the secondary school curriculum (or at least was during the author's school days

when he was at school), can hold more than one surprise. And what can be said of those epics that most Russians have barely even heard of! ‘Prince Roman and the Liviki Brothers’, ‘Danila Lovchanin’, ‘The Danube’, the epics about Ermak – not at all the same one who conquered Siberia! – about Saur Vaniovich and his son Saur Saurovich. But even the well-known bylin heroes we know from paintings, films, short stories… and, indeed, jokes. And jokes clearly predominate. If, for instance, animators from the Soviet era treated epic tales with a certain degree of respect (well, they made Vasilisa Mikulishna dress as a Horde envoy instead of a Lithuanian ambassador; well, for some reason they dressed Churila Plenkovich as a European Renaissance dandy; and – this is even understandable – they replaced the fierce episode where Ilya’s arrow gouged out the eye of the robber Solovey with a bloodless version), our contemporaries in *Alyosha Popovich and Tugarin the Serpent* are having a right old romp, without the slightest restraint from the need to take the epic or history into account. The only elements from the epic in this ‘masterpiece’ of Russian animation are the names of the main characters – Prince Vladimir – and the names of two cities – Kyiv and Rostov. A new animated film ‘based on’ the epic bylinas is on the way – this time, another Russian bogatyr, Dobrynya, will fall victim to the nimble-fingered animation profiteers. Judging by the trailers and reviews, it’s already clear that yet another farce awaits us. The science-fiction writers Burkin and Lukyanenko have had a field day with the Russian
epic in *The Island of Rus*[1] . And all the bogatyrs drink non-stop (including pure spirit, and even…
‘tsar’s vodka’, a mixture of nitric and hydrochloric acid in which jewellers dissolve gold), and their adventures are modelled on the Musketeers – again, the cinematic ones, not the literary ones – and the chief among them, Ivan the Fool, who has somehow strayed from a fairy tale into the world of epic tales, turns out to be… a Black man. And so on and so forth – Kolychev’s *The Three Bogatyrs*, Mikhail Uspensky’s *Zhikhariada*…

No, I’m not against humour, dear reader. It’s no good when there’s no sense of humour – but when everything and everyone is sacrificed for the sake of laughter, when of all emotions only a sense of humour remains – there’s something unhealthy about that too, isn’t there? Take the Spaniards, who made a film based on their
‘epic ballads’ – the romances – about the knight Rodrigo de Bivara, nicknamed El Cid Campeador (who, incidentally, bears a striking resemblance to our own Muromets), they found room for a smile, but they did not

into a continuous farce. The thought probably never even crossed their minds. As for us… well, back in Soviet times we made a few decent cartoons and one feature-length film, ‘Ilya Muromets’. But
hardly anyone watches ‘Ilya’ these days, whilst all the Soviet cartoons combined wouldn’t even amount to a quarter of the farcical ‘Popovich’. An imbalance. A lack of equilibrium, to put it in Russian terms.

And, after all, laughing at something you don’t really know much about isn’t right either. As the proverb goes, laughter without a reason… well, it’s an unhealthy symptom.

Therefore, I hope, dear reader, that you will agree with me that books such as these, devoted to our Russian epic tradition, will remain relevant for a long time to come. And anyone with a passion for history, for the memory and spirit of the Russian people, will find much of interest in them – including in this very book you hold in your hands.

The study of bylinas – for the sake of brevity, I shall henceforth simply refer to it as
‘bylinology’ – has gone through various phases, just like any other academic discipline. There have been highs and lows; the history of the study of the Russian epic has seen periods of stagnation as well as sudden leaps forward. At present, incidentally, times are not at their best either. This is particularly true for those historians who turn to the bylina as a source of information about the earliest periods of the Russian people. Most scholars have now grown very disillusioned with the search for information about ancient Rus’ in the bylina, and not without reason.

For almost the entire second half of the last century, our scholars engaged in fierce debate over the relationship between the Russian epic and history. On the one hand stood Academician Boris Alexandrovich Rybakov with his followers – M.M. Plisetsky, S.N. Azbelev and many others. On the other side stood Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp, a world-renowned folklorist whom Dmitry Balashov called
‘a school of thought within our discipline’ – and he was right. Propp was also supported by numerous pupils and followers. The debate, however, did not yield the truth; on the contrary, in their zeal, the debaters strayed very, very far from it, venturing into the most regrettable extremes.

Rybakov and his followers sought in the bylina a reflection of the events and characters found in the chronicles. Moreover, on the one hand, this was not without its stretches of the imagination – many of which we, the reader, are yet to examine. And on the other hand – and this is, perhaps, worse than any stretch of the imagination – the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the bylina as a historical source

It was underestimated – and in the most disastrous way. The Russian epic became a retelling, rendered in blank verse, of selected passages from the *Tale of Bygone Years* by the Pechersk chronicler. Any deviation was dismissed as a 'later addition', a 'distortion', 'epic fantasy' or 'mythological embellishment'. And useful, sometimes extremely valuable, historical information was simply 'thrown out'. The authority of Boris Alexandrovich Rybakov – a patriot and a remarkable scholar, yet at the same time a man driven by passion – cemented the name 'historical school' in the study of bylinas, associated with the search for chronicle 'prototypes' of bylinas' heroes and their adventures. Meanwhile, both before and after the October Revolution, a different tradition of historical bylinology existed. Rybakov and Plisetsky themselves had once paid tribute to it – before, in the heat of debate, straying onto the wrong path of searching for chronicle 'prototypes'.

Identifying this search with the 'historical school' itself played into the hands of their rivals. They did not merely point out – quite rightly, incidentally – the far-fetched nature of the parallels between the events and characters in the bylina and those in the chronicles. They drew the most categorical conclusions from this. Boris Putilov particularly distinguished himself in this regard. 'The epic does not reflect any historical events, and its heroes do not trace back to any historical prototypes,' he declares with the ruthless determination of a prosecutor. And he passes judgement: 'From a serious scholarly point of view, this question can be considered closed.'

Here, perhaps, it is worth recalling the anecdote about a certain eminent poet who declared: 'Yesterday I wrote a poem about love. I've closed the subject.' Can a scholar seriously expect to 'close the subject', and not even in his own field – Putilov is a philologist – but in someone else's, the field of history? I shall not even mention the manner in which the discussion is conducted – any objections are immediately dismissed as falling outside the scope of 'serious academic discourse'. Such tactics, alas, are not unique to Propp's pupils – though, on the other hand, they are by no means characteristic of all his followers. By conducting the discussion in this way, the researcher risks getting himself into a tight spot – and indeed, Putilov does find himself in a tight spot.

Here he objects to those who see the heroic figures of the bylina as a historical princely druzhina. 'In the bylina, Prince Vladimir has no druzhina. He is surrounded by "princes-boyars", "merchant guests",

servants, but there is no mention of a retinue. There is no basis whatsoever for equating the bogatyrs with retinue members.'

Is that really the case? Count on your fingers, reader. The bogatyrs are professional mounted warriors in the service of the Prince of Kyiv. We see them mainly either in battle or at a feast in the prince's palace. They collect tribute for the prince. They travel on his orders on diplomatic missions to foreign rulers. They carry out his various commissions – alas, not always of the most honourable kind. They are united in a bond of solidarity. Yet, if the bogatyrs are dissatisfied with the prince, they consider themselves entitled to leave him and sometimes recall how they served under other rulers. Well, who are they, to use the language of historical scholarship? Yes, that's a tricky one… even for a schoolchild – and one who hasn't read their history textbooks.

One could go on listing the 'grounds' that link the epic defenders of the Russian land with historical retinues for a very long time indeed. These 'grounds' form a significant part of R.S. Lipets's remarkable book *Epic and Ancient Rus'* – and, understandably, disputing this work is a far more difficult task than condescendingly criticising the historian and archaeologist Rybakov for 'philological unprofessionalism'.

But is the philologist Putilov himself sufficiently professional?

Take, for instance, the bylina *Ermak and King Kalin*: Ilya Muromets intends to gather the bogatyrs:

> And when I ride out into the open field,
> And when I have gathered my brave *band*
> And when I have gathered thirty fine lads, not a single one…

The protagonist of Russian epics always puts his money where his mouth is – and so

> And lo and behold, the old Cossack Ilya
> Muromets rides forth, Ilya Muromets, son of
> Ivanovich,
> And with his whole *band* of brave men,
> And just as they've all gathered here
> And there were thirty fine lads, not a single one missing,

And there were thirty strong Russian bogatyrs.

As we can see, the epics feature a retinue, and this retinue consists precisely of bogatyrs (as to why it happens to be Ilya's retinue rather than that of Vladimir the Red Sun – that, dear reader, is a topic for another discussion). In the epic 'Stavr Godinovich', Vladimir organises a feast

For many princes and boyars,
For the whole valiant band,
For his entire brave *retinue*.

And here Vladimir is surrounded by his retinue; indeed, it is mentioned in the list of revellers in the very place where the bogatyrs are usually mentioned – though on this occasion they do not appear on the list. How are we to understand this? Quite simply: the retinue is the bogatyrs. And the bogatyrs are none other than the Kyiv retinue. This is clearly stated in the bylina. So go figure – either the philologist and folklorist Boris Putilov, who has been writing books on the Russian epic for half a century, hasn't really got to grips with it, or he knows it all perfectly well – yet still writes something different.

However, historians can be good too – take, for example, Ruslan Grigoryevich Skrynnikov, who states that the bylina emerged in the 10th century from the Scandinavian sagas. In other words, the Icelandic sagas – prosaic in every sense of the word, dry and documentary in style – somehow found their way to Rus', where they were transformed into the epic bylinas, losing in the process not only their prose form but also all their heroes and plots. As the British thinker and writer Gilbert Chesterton, better known to us as the author of the Father Brown detective stories, used to say: 'You cannot change a cow's feathers or a whale's flippers. If something has changed completely, it has not changed.' Is it any wonder, then, that following such 'research', historians' attempts to draw on the bylina are met with fierce opposition from folklorists?

We can agree with Propp's followers – the vast majority of the comparisons between bylinas and chronicles carried out by Rybakov's students are far-fetched, and blatantly so. I shall give more than one such example below. However, we shall not be in a hurry to agree with the conclusion

non-historicity of the bylinas. Both sides spectacularly overlook one very simple and obvious fact: a chronicle is merely a chronicle. No less – but no more. A chronicle is not history. The dispute between the disciples of Propp and Rybakov, in essence, turns out to be a dispute not about the historicity of the bylinas, but about their chronicle-like nature. The discussion centred on a comparison of two literary genres – is it any wonder, then, that the philologists proved stronger and more convincing in such a debate? The historians, for their part, had driven themselves into a dead end over the name of Nestor, confining themselves to comparing the bylinas with the chronicle – out of the entire vast body of knowledge and sources on Russian antiquity.

In this 'clash of the titans', a veritable treasure trove of knowledge about the Russian people's past was cast aside and forgotten. A vast body of information contained in the bylina, forming a coherent, consistent picture. This picture is formed not so much by the names of the epic heroes – these, as we shall see, change over time – nor so much by the plot conflicts – these, on the contrary, change very little from one people to another and from one era to another. What is most valuable are the features of the culture and social structure of epic Rus'. These features, however, turn out to be surprisingly ancient – too ancient even for Kievan Rus' under Svyatoslav the Brave and Igor, Son of the Falcon. In other words, this information shed light on an era not yet covered by the chronicles, offering an insider's view – a Russian perspective on those times of Rus' as a people and as a state – which we are accustomed to studying through the works of Byzantine, Western European and Eastern authors. What could be more valuable! And yet these treasures were cast aside by Rybakov's followers because they did not fit into their conceptual framework; his opponents did so partly for the same reason, and partly because, being philologists by training, they were far from always able to grasp the significance of this information for a historian. What can one do? Even Kozma Prutkov once said: 'A narrow specialist is like flux – his completeness is one-sided.'

It cannot, however, be said that these deposits of historical treasures were entirely overlooked by researchers. Not at all; quite the opposite, in fact. Individual 'nuggets' and 'diamonds' from this layer attracted the attention of all – or almost all – schools of Russian bylinology in the century before last. Among them were F.I. Buslaev and A.A. Kotlyarevsky, who sought Slavic myths in the bylina, and the leading figure of the 'borrowing' school, A.N. Veselovsky. It would take far too long

to list here the names of those researchers who gathered precious nuggets from this treasure trove in the 20th century, and indeed there is no need to do so. In any case, dear reader, we are about to follow in their footsteps. The first part of this book will be devoted to the history of the study of Russian bylinas. I would very much like, dear reader, to give you at least a glimpse, however brief, into the 'inner workings' of the researchers, their quests and their debates. When it comes to scholars, people outside their narrow circle often fall into two opposing extremes. To some, they seem like idlers, plucking theories out of thin air about things they do not know and cannot know, accepting one thing and rejecting another on a mere whim. Others, on the contrary, regard scientists as almost dispassionate celestial beings, privy to the treasure trove of mythical 'Objective Knowledge'. The former, accordingly, are generally unwilling to take the views of academic scholars into account at all, whilst the latter believe that since the SCHOLARS have spoken, that is how it is, and the debate is over. Both are extremes, the path of least resistance, which always leads downwards. It will therefore be all the more useful for the reader to see how historians and folklorists went about their work, what conflicting views arose, and how the course of research was influenced by the prevailing mood of the time, strict state oversight and the even more dogmatic and intolerant dictates
of the 'progressive, enlightened public'—within whose circle they were forced to operate, and from which the researchers of the Russian epic themselves often hailed. One must not adopt a consumerist attitude towards the work of scholars, particularly historians and folklorists. Anyone who takes the liberty of accepting or rejecting a scholar's opinion must understand how that opinion came about.

The first part of this book will be devoted precisely to the history of the study of the Russian epic. Naturally, this overview will be neither comprehensive nor exhaustive – we have neither the time nor the space for that. Our focus is specifically on scholars' research into the most ancient historical layers within the Russian epic.

The features of ancient way of life and worldview identified by scholars will tell us about the age of the Russian bylinas. We shall move from one such feature to another, as if following landmarks, deep into the past – from more recent features to ever more ancient ones. This approach is known as

retrospective. This journey into the distant past will take up the second part.

But where will this journey take us – to which specific centuries, to which lands, and where and when did the prototypes of the epic heroes carry out their deeds? The third part will be devoted to the homeland of the plots and heroes of the Russian epic: epic Rus'.

Part One: Scholars and Epic Tales

Chapter 1
How Vladimir ‘Red Sun’ became Svyatoslavich, and Ilya became Muromets. The pre-scientific period of bylin studies

As I have already mentioned, the history of the study of the Russian epic as a whole is a topic of far too great a scope. Moreover, to draw conclusions or ‘close the subject’ in the manner of Putilov in any field of scholarship, particularly in the humanities, is an extremely thankless task. One need only recall how, some thirty or forty years ago, Soviet historians declared the Norman theory to have been refuted; this theory had explained the origins of the Russian state through the activities of invading Normans – the so-called Varangians of the Russian chronicles. At present, pure Normanism, in the vein of Gottfried Müller’s 1749 lecture at the St Petersburg Academy of Sciences, prevails in both specialist and popular books on the origins of Russian history, presented as the final word of science. At the end of the 19th century, George Frazer explained the common features of Old Testament traditions with the legends and beliefs of virtually all the peoples of the Earth through similar paths of social development and people’s conceptions of the world. Towards the end of the 20th century, Messrs Petrukhin and Danilevsky explained any similarity between, say, the *Tale of Bygone Years* and the Bible by citing passages from the latter – for instance, the Varangians, the Rurik brothers, Truvor and Sineus, who came to Rus’ and settled in Ladoga, Izborsk and Beloye Ozero; this, it turns out, is the influence of the Old Testament legend about the three sons of the patriarch Noah, who divided the earth amongst themselves after the Flood. As if Russian fairy tales were not full of legends about three prince-brothers, as if, even from Scythian times, the legend did not speak of three king-brothers who divided the land of the Scythian ploughmen on the banks of the Dnieper – Kolo, Lipo and Arpo!

There are countless such examples.

We shall confine ourselves to the history of scholars’ views on the reflection of a deep, pre-feudal, pre-Christian, pre-state antiquity in the bylina.

The first attempts to address the relationship between the bylinas and history began long before the emergence of the disciplines of history and philology. As far back as the sixteenth century, the author of the Nikon Chronicle tackled these issues in his own way, introducing the bylinas' heroes – Alexander (Alesha) Popovich and Vasily Buslaev – into the text. It was he who was the first
'transformed' the bylin hero Vladimir Krasno Solnyshko into Vladimir I Svyatoslavich, the baptiser of Rus'. New generations confidently followed in his footsteps. Thus, Vasily Alekseyevich Levshin, a writer of 'Catherine's Golden Age', wrote *Russian Fairy Tales* based on epic motifs – which, incidentally, inspired Pushkin to write *Ruslan and Lyudmila*. In these tales, Levshin also identifies 'Vladimir Svyatoslavich of Kyiv and All Russia' with the epic prince. It is telling that he refers to the prince as 'Svyatoslavich' only in the author's preface, whereas in the
Tales he refers to him as 'the glorious Prince Vladimir of Kiev, the little sun Vseslavievich'. Following Levshin's lead, the first publisher of *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, quoting a bylin passage from Kirshi Danilov's *Ancient Russian Poems*, replaces the patronymic
'Vseslavich' with the 'correct' 'Svyatoslavich' – the latter appearing in the bylinas only as late as the 20th century. Finally, this identification was legitimised by the authority of Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin – and after him it came to be regarded as a commonplace, almost an axiom.

An interesting observation by Vasily Nikitich Tatishchev, who apparently associated the 'ancient songs about Prince Vladimir' he had heard from 'skomorokhs' not with the baptiser of Rus', but with an ancient pagan prince of the same name, an ancestor of Gostomysl who summoned Rurik, has, as far as I am aware, gone unnoticed.

Even more fascinating is the story of how the chief hero of Russian epic tales came to be known by the nickname 'Muromets', by which he is now known, and also gained a place amongst the saints venerated by the Orthodox Church. The Church dates the life of this 'saint'—whose 'relics' were recently transported with great pomp 'back to his homeland', to Murom—to the twelfth century. However, his hagiography, as is telling and as even ecclesiastical authors acknowledge, does not exist. In the *Kiev-Pechersk Paterikon*, which describes in detail life at the monastery in that very twelfth century, there is not a hint of the Murom warrior's presence there – although the biographies of far less notable monks are meticulously recounted over dozens of pages. However, this is hardly surprising – in

the twelfth century, Prince Constantine, Equal to the Apostles, had only just managed to baptise the stubborn ‘Murom saints’, using catapults beneath the city walls as his most compelling theological argument. The earliest reports of the bogatyr’s relics in the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra also do not identify their owner as the Muromets. The Jesuit Erich Lasotta, envoy of the Austrian Emperor Rudolf II to the Zaporozhian Cossacks, was the first to describe the remains of the ‘giant Ilya Morovlin’ in 1594. Twenty years earlier, in a letter to Ostafiy Volovych, the castellan of Trotsk, Filon Kmyta Chernobylsky, the starosta of Orsha, mentioned the epic hero Ilya Muravlenin, though this was unrelated to the relics or the Lavra.

As early as the late 19th–early 20th centuries, Russian scholars D.I. Ilovaisky and B.M. Sokolov convincingly proved that the reason for Muravlenin’s transformation into the peasant’s son Muromets was the appearance, in the early 17th century, of a follower of the famous rebel Ivan Bolotnikov: the Cossack impostor Ileyka Ivanov, son of Muromets, who passed himself off as the non-existent ‘Tsarevich Peter’. Numerous local Murom legends, linking the names of tracts of land, the emergence of springs and hillocks to the exploits of Ilya Muromets, were apparently originally dedicated to this very bandit Cossack. Such ‘fighters for the people’s happiness’—from giants such as Stepan Razin, Emelyan Pugachev and Vanka Kain to lesser-known figures like Roshchin or Zelyin—were the favourite heroes of folk tales in the Russian Empire. The names of forests, mountains and rivers were very often associated with them – sometimes in the most incredible ways. Thus, the river Kineshma is said to have taken its name from the anguished cry of a Persian princess on Razin’s boat: ‘Kinesh mya!’ (‘You’re drowning me!’). Needless to say, Stepan Timofeyevich drowned the unfortunate captive hundreds of versts from Kineshma – incidentally, not in the Volga, as the famous song goes, but in the Yaik, which at that time was not yet called the Ural. On the banks of the Kama, this or that hill appears to the local peasants as a heap of earth spilled from Pugachev’s boot. In the Zhiguli Mountains, almost every stone is associated with the memory, if not of Razin and Pugachev themselves, then of their comrades-in-arms. And so on and so forth. As for the other epic heroes – Alyosha, Dobrynya, Svyatogor and the like – there are no such legends, and the Murom legends about the spring that gushed forth from beneath Ilya’s horse’s hooves, or about the hill that rose where he threw down his cap,

are not linked to the bylinas, but to tales of bandits. It was only later that they were associated with the impostor who shared the same name as the bylin hero. The hero himself is much older: his name, as we shall see, appears in Germanic legends and Swedish sagas in the 11th–13th centuries.

The cult of ‘Saint Ilya Muromets’ itself flourished towards the end of that same seventeenth century. During the Nikonite Schism in the Russian Church, numerous pilgrims flocked to the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra to venerate the relics of the holy bogatyr. And here a most amusing misunderstanding arose – the Old Believers, upon their return, insisted that the saint’s hand was folded in the ‘ancient two-fingered sign’. The Nikonites, for their part, saw the saint’s fingers, ‘to put the schismatics’ foolishness to shame’, folded in the three-fingered sign. Finally, when the passions of the Schism had subsided, the hand of ‘Ilya Muromets’ was found lying peacefully on top of the vestments with its fingers straightened. Since it is clear to everyone that any attempt to bend or straighten the withered fingers of the relics – essentially, a mummy – would only lead to their destruction, there remain but two explanations for this strange phenomenon. The first suggests that within the Lavra, this centre of Orthodox holiness, an unclean spirit was mocking the pilgrims (with the aid of the holy relics) – surely the heavenly powers would not have so cruelly mocked the feelings of the faithful! The second, more mundane explanation – towards which, dear reader, I too am inclined – is that, by the end of the 17th century, the monks of the Caves had not yet firmly decided which of the relics belonged to Ilya Muromets. Whilst the Schism was still raging, and the authority of the Russian state and the Patriarch of Moscow over Kyiv was not yet firmly established, the monks of the Caves – some out of personal conviction, others out of self-interest – would lead the Old Believers to the relics with the right hand folded with two fingers, and Nikon’s reformists to those with the fingers folded in a ‘pinch’. Subsequently, however, so as not to stir up tensions, relics with straightened fingers were selected for the role of ‘Saint Ilya Muromets’ – neither one thing nor the other, so to speak. And so, based on these very relics of an unknown monk, certain so-called ‘scholars’— in the fervour of the ‘church revival’ of the late 1980s—
‘reconstructed’ both the physical appearance of the epic hero and, one might say, even his biography! And it is precisely these nameless relics that have recently been moved
‘back to their homeland’. All that remains, truly, is to pray to God that the owner
of these ‘holy’ remains had at least some connection to Murom during his lifetime. However, it seems he no longer cares about this; on the other hand, the people of Murom

have received ‘clear proof’ that the chief hero of Russian epic tales was their fellow countryman, whilst the Murom authorities, both secular and ecclesiastical, have gained a decent source of income from both pilgrims and ordinary tourists. After all, if we’ve gone so far as to declare Veliky Ustyug the ‘birthplace of Father Christmas’ and the village of Kukoboy in the Pervomaisky District of the Yaroslavl Region the ‘birthplace of Baba Yaga’ – why should ‘Ilya Muromets’ be any worse?

The linking of ‘Saint Ilya Muromets’ to the twelfth century is characterised by roughly the same degree of reliability and plausibility. Lasotta mentioned in passing that ‘Elia Morovlin’ had performed heroic deeds some four hundred or five hundred years ago. Orthodox writers quickly counted back four hundred years from Lasotta’s time – and there you have it: the twelfth century! The fact that there were no precise dates in the legends heard by the foreign ambassador, nor could there have been, and that, ultimately, the writings of a German Jesuit are not the best source for seeking information about an Orthodox saint – this, it seems, did not trouble anyone. The main thing is for the good of the Church, for the glory of Christ. As for the truth – that’s a secondary matter. Well, our contemporary Andrei Kuraev, who is prepared to even enlist Harry Potter in the cause of Orthodox preaching, has worthy predecessors. Indeed, they were not the first – were not the Celtic pagan goddess Brigid (a relative of the Norse Frigg, wife of Odin, and our own Bereginya) and the Alexandrian pagan Hypatia, murdered by Christians, also declared Christian saints?

As we shall see later, the principal hero of the Russian epic was no better a ‘Christian’ than these worthy women.

It is also worth noting that, in connection with the cult surrounding the relics attributed to Ilya Muromets, a very enduring legend persisted amongst the people that these relics had been found in caves on the banks of the Dnieper since a time predating the founding of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra by Anthony in the early 11th century. I ask you, the reader, to bear this in mind – we shall return to this tradition when we discuss the time and place of the emergence of the Russian epic.

This is how, in a sense, the atmosphere was created in which subsequent researchers of the epic traditions of the Russian people had to work.

Chapter 2
How scholars discovered the bylina

Educated Russian society really did have to discover its own people's epic as if it were some unknown land. However, at the time when the discipline of history was emerging, this 'country' did not arouse much interest. Both Tatishchev and the publisher of *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* mentioned the bylina only in footnotes and commentaries, whilst Karamzin touched upon them only in passing, in a few words. Such were the times, dear reader. A time when Empress Catherine was seriously considering Bazhenov's architectural plans, which envisaged the demolition of part of the Kremlin walls, and the young Karamzin wrote enthusiastically about these plans in his diary, whilst Metropolitan Filaret, with an unshakeable hand, signed the order for the demolition of Moscow's oldest church. The age of Classicism and Empire style, with their idolatrous reverence for the 'correct' forms of antiquity; the age of 'Reason' and the ideas of the 'Enlightenment', which had taken hold of those powdered heads. From this perspective, the national epic appeared as a fragment of barbarism and superstition and could have no scientific value whatsoever.

It would seem that the late 18th and early 19th centuries were long past, when the benevolent ravings of the Enlightenment thinkers were met with the grinding of guillotine blades, when powdered heads rolled – in the name of Reason, naturally! – from the scaffolds. When the 'beacon of Progress' turned into the glow of a burning Moscow, and the word 'sharomyzhnik' entered the Russian language, denoting an arsonist and looter smeared with blood and soot, the glorious son of revolutionary France – one might have thought it was high time to sober up! But no – the minds of the champions of progress and enlightenment are rigid and inflexible; the admirers of *Reason* were least inclined to take reality into account. As far back as 1815, the elderly Derzhavin – that very same Gavrila Derzhavin! – characterised the first edition of Russian bylina in Kirshi Danilov's collection as 'nonsense, barbarism and gross disrespect' for the tastes of 'refined society'. Prince N.A. Tseretelev, a folklorist well-known at the time, contemptuously dismissed the bylina as: 'crude taste and

ignorance – these are the hallmarks of these tales'. The same Karamzin – and again in his notes, as it were in private, so as not to tarnish the reputation of the noble public in their 'refined' salons – posthumously rebuked Mikhail Vasilyevich Lomonosov, who had taken it into his head to draw parallels between Hellenic myths and – 'what a faux pas!' – Russian fairy tales. A nobleman, a descendant of the baptised Murzas of the Golden Horde, sneered at this uncouth lout, this Nordic giant from Kholmogory – as if to say, Baba Yaga and the Sea Tsar are peasant, common folk tales, which, of course, cannot be compared to the mythology of the Greeks and are of no interest whatsoever. To compare leshy with fauns, nymphs with mermaids?! How on earth is that possible?! Surely Mr Lomonosov did not mean to suggest that the reception rooms and parks of the Russian nobility are adorned with depictions of the very same creatures about which the common folk spin their tall tales?!

Pah!!

A century and a half has passed. It has long been an established fact that Slavic paganism and Hellenic mythology share common Indo-European origins. The mythological roots of the figures of Baba Yaga and the Sea Tsar have long since been established. For a long time now, 'lower mythology'—with its leshy, domovoi and mermaids—has been the subject of the most meticulous study by ethnographers and mythologists. Yet to this day, historians still hold in high regard the powdered, sentimental Horde figure, whilst many historians regard the Russian Genius—who, as ever, looked centuries ahead—with the contemptuous sneer of a fine French greyhound that has caught the scent of a peasant's foot.

Vasily Levshin, mentioned above, was forced to disfigure his *Russian Fairy Tales* with 'rational' interpretations in keeping with the spirit of the age, transforming, for example, a river of fire into… a row of mirrors on springs. Otherwise, the 'respectable public' simply would not have read it… though even then he did not dare to 'disgrace' his noble surname by placing it on the title page of a book based on Russian epic tales. In this respect, Vasily Alekseyevich proved to be very far-sighted – one need only recall how much his brilliant successor, Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin, had to endure for his poem

'Ruslan and Lyudmila', which was based on Levshin's 'Tales'. A.G. Glagolev, a specialist in folk poetry (!), made a scathing remark about the poem: 'Who would argue that praising one's own country

is praiseworthy; but can one agree that everything concocted by the Kirshs and Danilovs is good and may be worthy of imitation?' A certain critic, hiding behind the pseudonym 'A Resident of Butyrskaya Sloboda', expressed his indignation at the poet: 'Allow me to ask: if, by some chance (assuming the impossible is possible), a bearded guest in an Armenian coat and bast shoes were to worm his way into the Moscow Noble Assembly and shout in a booming voice: "Cheers, lads!", would you really admire such a prankster?!'

I repeat – all these opinions and actions do not come from some mediocre figures or Russophobes. These were the pillars and leading lights of the cultural society of the time, specialists in folklore and folk culture, whilst Bazhenov, Derzhavin and Karamzin have gone down in the history of Russian art and literature. And I am describing all this not to knock them off their pedestal, but simply so that you, the reader, might appreciate the feat of the pioneers who studied the Russian epic.

Do remember, after all, what sort of tsar reigned whilst all this was being written and spoken. 'A weak and cunning ruler, a bald dandy, an enemy of labour, unwittingly flattered by fame, reigned over us at that time.' This is Pushkin, whilst Leskov, in 'Levsha', portrayed the bald 'fantastic traveller' (oh, how lucky poor Russia is to have such characters!) even more scathingly – 'Tsar Lyaksandra'. Not even 'Lyaksandr' – apparently, in the eyes of his subjects, this emperor didn't quite measure up to being considered a man. And it is very accurately portrayed in the same *Levsha* how 'Lyaksandr' raves about everything foreign, whilst not forgetting to take a wistful swipe at Russian craftsmanship in passing. And as the priest goes, so goes the parish…

The situation changed somewhat under the next tsar. And one may criticise 'Nikolai Palkin', the 'gendarme of Europe', as much as one likes, but it was precisely under this sovereign-knight—who began his reign by bringing the latest Enlightenment thinkers to their senses with grapeshot and gallows—Chaadaev, who apparently tried, out of old habit, to denounce Russian history and the Russian people all at once, found himself, to his unspeakable surprise, in a sanatorium for the mentally ill – or, to use modern parlance, a loony bin.

What is important for us is that it was precisely during the reign of Nikolai Pavlovich, in the 1830s, that a targeted search for bylina began – those very wild and crude 'fairy tales' of the unpolished Russian peasantry. And it was at that time

the word ‘bylina’ entered scholarly usage. To this day, one can still come across – sometimes presented as ‘firmly established’ – the view expressed by Vsevolod Miller in 1895 that the word is not of folk origin. Allegedly, Ilya Petrovich Sakharov, a passionate collector of Russian folklore, took it from *The Tale of Igor’s Campaign* and turned it into a term for heroic songs and legends. Yet Miller was almost immediately contradicted by A.S. Arkhangelsky, himself a collector of bylinas. He pointed out that in the 1830s and 1840s, the word ‘bylina’ was already in common use amongst the peasants of the Vologda Governorate (with the stress on the final syllable – ‘bylina’`) and specifically in the sense of a song about bogatyrs, and in the Arkhangelsk and Olonets provinces it meant the same thing (‘give me half a kopeck, and I’ll sing a bylina’). Half a century later, in 1953, P.D. Ukhov spoke out in support of the Arkhangelsk view, citing Siberian records made by folklore collectors in the mid-19th century (‘bylina – a Siberian word’).

> And from whence did it
> all come — Ah, where
> are the witty jokes,
> Proverbs, rhymes, Tall
> tales, *bylina*
> from Orthodox antiquity—

wrote Pushkin of Pakhomovna, the master storyteller.

However, researchers – particularly those belonging to the Propp school – persistently repeat, as an established truth, the view of Vsevolod Miller, even though he would seem to be one of the leading figures of the ‘historical’ school they so dislike. The fact is that it is very important for Propp’s followers to emphasise that the bylina supposedly does not stem from any ‘byla’, that is, historical specifics. It would probably be more accurate, after all, to regard the word ‘bylina’

a rare term, yet one of folk origin, which fully reflects the storytellers’ attitude towards the epic (‘not a fairy tale or a fable, but a true tale’).

Thirty years of effort by pioneering collectors made possible, in the 1860s, the publication of ‘The Songs of V.P. Kireevsky’ and P.N. Rybnikov’s discovery of the Onega bylinas. In

the Russian North, a treasure trove of folklore and epic poetry was discovered, and these harsh lands became a place of pilgrimage for folklorists for almost a century. They were sometimes poetically referred to as ‘the Iceland of Russian epic poetry’. It is on this remote island in the North Atlantic that the Scandi-Germanic legends, some dating back to the era of the Great Migration, the fall of Rome and the invasion of Attila the Hun, have been best preserved. The comparison is a fine one, but an inaccurate one. The fact is that a considerable proportion of the legends preserved in Iceland had not been forgotten in the very regions where their stories are set – in the fjords of Scandinavia, on the banks of the Rhine and the Danube. At the same time, even in the very ‘capital city of Kyiv’, we shall find not a trace of these epic legends. Below, we shall examine in detail the reasons for this curious situation.

Chapter 3
Myths, borrowings or history? Schools of epic studies before October

The study of bylinas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is usually divided into a number of schools. Of course, in those days, academic schools had not yet taken on the character of political parties or religious sects, as they did in the second half of the twentieth century. Nowadays, it is almost impossible for someone who began their academic career as a follower of B.D. Grekov's ideas to become a follower of I.Ya. Froyanov; a follower of V.Ya. Propp would not join the historical school of B.A. Rybakov, and a proponent of

of 'neo-Normannism' espoused by V. Ya. Petrukhin, R. G. Skrynnikov and L. S. Klein is unlikely to join the ranks of A. G. Kuzmin's students. The phrase: 'My hand, colleague – you have convinced me' – is almost unthinkable in academic debate of the late 20th and early 21st centuries – at least amongst linguists, folklorists or historians.

In the 19th century, by contrast, there are a number of such examples. For instance, Vsevolod Miller and F.I. Buslaev, who began as prominent representatives of the theory of borrowing and the mythological theory respectively, subsequently aligned themselves with the historical school.

Nevertheless, a number of distinct strands can be clearly identified in nineteenth-century folklore studies, namely: the mythological school (sometimes also referred to as the solar-meteorological school), the comparative school (put simply, the school of borrowing), and, finally, the historical school. And when studying this era of epic poetry research, it is impossible to ignore them.

Emerging in the first half of the nineteenth century in Germany under the influence of Romanticism and disillusionment with the myths of the 'Enlightenment', the mythological school in our country was represented by figures—some of whom were of world renown—such as A.N. Afanasiev, F.I. Buslaev, Orest Miller and many others. In recent years, following a hiatus of almost a century and a half, Afanasyev's seminal work, the three-volume *Poetic Views of the Slavs on Nature*, has been reprinted on several occasions. The publishers of

Buslaev's works; nevertheless, a collection of his articles, published under the general title *The Folk Epic and Mythology* in Moscow in 2003, is available to any inquisitive reader.

The 'Mythological School' was so named because its adherents traced the plot structures of the bylinas and their depictions of everyday life back to mythology. In mythology, they, in turn, saw an allegorical description of natural phenomena, primarily thunderstorms, rain and other weather phenomena. To them, the gods appeared as embodiments of the Sun and Thunder, whilst demons represented clouds or the winter cold. Hence, another name for this school emerged – the solar-mythological school.

In the eyes of these scholars, the bylinas were in themselves pre-Christian, pre-state archaic myths about Russian gods, only slightly veiled by Christian names. In Vladimir Krasno Solnyshko, they saw – as one might easily guess – the Sun King Dazhbog. Ilya Muromets, through the figure of Ilya the Thunderer, was identified with the heavenly warrior, Perun, the Thunderer. The bogatyr's sword (as well as his mace, spear and arrow) became a bolt of lightning, whilst the enemy hordes became a cloud. Ilya, in their view, sat by the stove, confined by illness – though in reality it was the winter chill – until wondrous travellers (the autumn clouds) quenched his thirst with life-giving moisture (rain). Then he regained his strength and, armed with arrows of lightning, set off to battle the robber Nightingale, the embodiment of the winter winds.

Sometimes, however, within the epic tradition a distinction was still made 'senior' and 'junior' bogatyrs. The expression 'senior bogatyrs' appears in one bylina about Ilya Muromets.

> The elder bogatyrs are astonished:
> 'Ilya Muromets is not here for the
> expedition! He has a fine, youthful
> bearing,
> and all his actions are those of a bogatyr.'

The Slavophile Konstantin Aksakov was the first to propose distinguishing between them, and Fyodor Ivanovich Buslaev supported him. Both of them understood by
'eldest' bogatyrs to be those in whom the pagan, 'titanic' element is all too evident – the giant Svyatogor, the werewolf prince Volg Vseslavich, the magical ploughman Mikula

Selyaninovich. It should be noted, however, that the epic itself does not draw a clear distinction between the ‘elder bogatyrs’ and the other heroes of the bylinas.

The interpretation of the bylinas as ‘disguised myths’ was highly far-fetched. There have been many cultures in which myths and epic tales of heroes existed separately and independently. The Puranas and Itihasas of India, the myths and legends of Hellas, the mythological and heroic songs of the ‘Elder Edda’. Siegfried slew the dragon – and Thor slew the Serpent – but Siegfried was clearly not a ‘historised Thor’, just as Heracles, the slayer of the Lernaean Hydra, did not represent a humanised, down-to-earth version of Apollo the serpent-slayer. The naïve methods of mythologists allowed them to reduce the life of any historical figure to the same old solar-meteorological schema. The first to spot this was the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Pérez – and with truly French ease and wit, he penned a pamphlet in which, with a serious air and in strict accordance with the rules of ‘mythological’ theory, he argued that Napoleon Bonaparte was none other than… a solar myth. Indeed – his first name means ‘Nai Apollo’, ‘True Apollo’, whilst his surname, Bonaparte, meaning ‘the good part’, signifies the Sun’s dominion over the light part of the day, the daytime, and summer – the warm half of the year. Speaking of Leto – Napoleon’s mother was called Letizia, whilst Apollo’s mother was Leto or Lethe – is it not clear that they are one and the same?! Napoleon’s twelve marshals are the signs of the zodiac; his children are the seasons; the hydra of revolution (re-voluta, writhing!) which he vanquished is the serpent Python, slain by Apollo; and so on and so forth. The English ethnographer Edward Taylor wrote in 1871: ‘There is no legend, allegory or nursery rhyme that is safe from the ever-pervasive mythological theorist… It is also not difficult to point to solar motifs personified in historical figures chosen with a certain degree of discretion. Thus, Cortés, landing in Mexico and mistaken by the Aztecs for Quetzalcoatl himself, the Priest of the Sun, returns from the East to restore his kingdom of light and glory. Like the Sun departing the Dawn, he leaves the wife of his youth and, in his later years, betrays Marina for another bride. Like the Sun, his brilliant, triumphant career is only overshadowed by clouds of sorrow and disfavour at the twilight of his life.

Even the life of Julius Caesar can be fitted into the framework of the solar myth. Whichever country he enters, he comes, he sees, he conquers. He leaves Cleopatra, establishes the solar year, dies at the hands of Brutus—much like Siegfried in the Song of the Nibelungs, who dies at the hands of Hagen—and, falling under a hail of blows, covered in blood, he wraps himself in his toga to die in darkness.'

In the very same year, Fyodor Ivanovich Buslaev, a leading figure in the Russian and international school of mythology, wrote very similar things. He recalls with bitterness his fascination with solar and meteorological symbolism: 'According to this theory, everything is explained easily, simply and clearly, whatever event is being recounted… Where a bylina speaks of a 'mountain', according to this theory we are to understand not a mountain, but a cloud; if a bogatyr strikes Gorynya, it is neither the bogatyr nor Gorynya, but lightning and a cloud." Another Russian mythologist, A.A. Kotlyarevsky, wrote a year later in a review of Afanasyev's three-volume work, with its lightning-arrows and celestial treasures: 'How will the author refute us if we see in the arrows an ordinary weapon of war from the pre-firearm era, and in the golden treasury of Solovey the Robber a poetic embellishment of the imagination to the concept of a robber who lives by plunder and robbery?'

Criticism of the mythological school came, not least, from within. Its followers – at least many of them – were well aware of its weaknesses and shortcomings. However, it was not without its merits. Of course, at that level of studying myth as a phenomenon—in terms of its correct understanding, its proper place in the culture and consciousness of the people, and its interconnection with the epic—there was no question of such matters. From the outset, the mythological school's view of the very essence of myth was flawed; it was perceived as a 'disease of language', the result of a 'misunderstanding' of natural phenomena, and so on. Yet the mythologists collected and systematised a vast amount of material. It was they who demonstrated that the epic exists, so to speak, within a mythological context – the concept of 'mythological consciousness' was still many decades away. Many of the observations made by scholars of this school remain relevant to this day. Foremost among these is F.I. Buslaev's study of the bylinas about Volga and Mikula. The identification of Volga-Volkh with the sorcerer Volkh of Novgorod legends has, unfortunately, been rejected by later researchers;

yet, as we shall see, this identification is the sole key to this epic figure. The obvious parallels drawn by Buslaev between the figure of the magical ploughman Mikula and the ploughman-princes of West Slavic legends have also been overlooked.

The ‘anti-national sentiment’ of our intelligentsia prevented it from abandoning an interpretation of the epic that resonated so sweetly with its consciousness: the humiliation of the prince and his retinue as a sort of archetypal embodiment of either the Slavophile ‘zemstvo’ or the ‘working people’ of socialists of all stripes. As a result, the only convincing explanation of this bylina, as far as I am aware, came to nothing.

The mythological school did not entirely disappear at the end of the nineteenth century. V. Ya. Propp drew heavily on it. In the second half of the twentieth century, the linguists V. N. Toporov and V. V. Ivanov developed a theory of

the ‘primary Indo-European myth’, which bore a striking resemblance to the constructs of Afanasiev, who saw in every plot the battle of the Thunderer against his serpent-like adversary.

Finally, the ideas of the nineteenth-century mythologists found an unexpected continuation in the works of the so-called Russian Vedic scholars, who rather arbitrarily ‘reconstructed’ Russian mythology from the bylina and ‘recognised’ Perun in Ilya Muromets, and, for some reason, Dazhbog in Dobrynya.

At roughly the same time as the mythological school, a comparative school—or the school of borrowings—emerged. It began with the works of Stasov and Potanin, who asserted that the bylin epic—whose main theme was battles with the steppe ‘Tatars’ fought not for life but for death, in which the best outcome was considered to be ‘they cut down old and young alike, leaving not a single heathen to bear seed’—had been brought to Rus’… by the Horde’s invasion. There is nothing more to add to the assessment of these works. Such fanciful ideas can arise only in the minds of our intelligentsia. As far as I am aware, no one has attempted to trace

The Song of the Nibelungs to Hun traditions, trace Serbian haidouk songs back to Turkish folklore, or attribute *The Song of Roland* to the Algerian Arabs – descendants of the Saracens. And it is only in our

‘enlightened’ minds do such ideas arise—if I may say so—whether about a Polovtsian author of *The Tale of Igor’s Campaign* or about Russian bylinas being borrowed from the Tatars.

However, we shall still have to devote a few more words to this topic, for even today this wild theory has its supporters – for example, the archaeologist Andrei Leonidovich Nikitin, who attempts – in a single paragraph of his book *The Foundations of Russian History* – to 'prove' the unprovable: the Tatar or Polovtsian origin of Russian bylinas. Did the figure of Mikula Selyaninovich, the magical ploughman, come into our epic from the Turkic nomads? Did the marvellous ship of Solovyi Budimirovich, Ilya Muromets' 'Falcon-ship', and the boats of Sadko and Buslay sail into our epics from them? Did the following elements in the epics
'Honey beer' – rather than kumys – at feasts? Golden-domed towers, city walls, corner towers and high courtyard fences? 'Window frames with slats' – from nomadic felt yurts, one presumes? The interior layout of the epics' dwellings, with stoves, benches, wide tables and chamber beams – where, then, is the Turkic influence here? The bogatyrs' disdain for projectile weapons? Finally, their constant kinship and ties with the lands of Politovsk, Lyakhovets and Pomorye, and their unquenchable, blood-fuelled enmity towards the
'pagan' peoples, whom the storytellers do not even recognise as human: 'Oh, you wretched Tatars, who among you can speak the *Russian* language, *the language of humanity*?' The Russian epic is not merely non-steppe in character; it is about a mortal and merciless enmity with the Steppe.

More convincing were the studies of comparatists who sought and found parallels to Russian bylinas in the West—A.N. Veselovsky, I.P. Sozonovich, K.F. Tiander. However, in these parallels one can see not only, and not so much, 'borrowing' as the common origins of the epics, the reflection in them of the same events and processes, and, finally, simply a similar outlook on life, stemming from the linguistic, cultural and racial kinship of the Russians with the white peoples of Europe.

Of particular interest to us are the last two articles by A.N. Veselovsky. First and foremost is 'The Rus' and the Viltians in the Saga of Thidrek of Bern'. In the appendix to this article, the scholar has, for the first time, translated into Russian all the parts of this epic monument relating to the Rus' and other Slavs – the 'Pulin' (Poles) and the 'Viltians' (Lutichians). However, the scholar was unable to give due credit either to the historical data of the saga or to the historical significance of the parallels between it and the Russian bylina; he was hindered not only by the prejudices

of comparative scholars, but also the deep conviction held by all authors of that time that the historical reality depicted in the bylina could not predate the time of Vladimir the Baptist. A number of interesting observations regarding the Russian epic and its Scandi-Germanic parallels are contained in another of the scholar's articles, 'The Bylina of Volkh Vseslavich and the Poems about Ortnit'. The scholar did not manage to publish this article during his lifetime, and it was published, almost a century later, by the contemporary Russian researcher S.N. Azbelev.

As regards the 'school of borrowings' as a whole, one can only echo the words of Vsevolod Miller, who began as its ardent supporter but later became the recognised head of the historical school:

'Tracing the paths of the spread of the Russian fairy tale [and, I would add, any form of folklore. – *L. P.*], is like trying to catch the wind in a field. However close any two variants of the same plot may be to one another, in most cases we cannot conclude that this similarity is determined by close kinship, explained by geographical proximity. It is not uncommon for two variants, the most geographically distant from one another, to coincide in a greater number of details than two neighbouring ones."

I shall illustrate the scholar's final remark with a couple of clear examples. In Ireland there is a legend about a poor musician with a hump on his back, who hid from the rain in ruins favoured by the Sidhe elves. There he heard them singing – and managed to join in so well that the elves, delighted, rid him of his hump. Upon hearing of this, a certain wealthy man, who had a hump on his chest, dreamt of ridding himself of it in the same way. He, too, crept into the same ruins at night – but the elves disliked his singing so much that not only did they fail to rid him of his hump, but also moulded the musician's hump onto his back.

In Japan, there is a tale of an old man with a lump on his right cheek who, having decided to wait out a night-time storm in the ruins of a temple, fell into the hands of demons who had gathered there for a revelry. However, the old man danced so spiritedly at their feast that the demons not only left him unharmed, but also removed the lump from his cheek. A wealthy old man from a neighbouring village, who also had a lump growing on his cheek – but on the left one – heard about this. Deciding to get rid of his lump, he made his way to the ruins indicated by the kind pauper… and, naturally, ended up with the pauper's lump on his healthy cheek.

The similarity is obvious, isn't it? And yet it is impossible to imagine how this story could have crossed the vast expanse of Eurasia between the two islands without leaving a single trace along the way.

Another Japanese legend tells that the radiant Sun Goddess, Amaterasu, offended by the fierce god Susanoo, hid herself in a cave and refused to come out. No amount of persuasion could convince her to leave her refuge – and life on Earth without the Sun was a struggle. So the goddess's maid, Ame-no-Uzume, began to perform a merry dance, half-naked. The gods, gathered around her, expressed their approval with shouts, laughter and clapping. And the aggrieved Amaterasu, unable to resist her curiosity, left the cave and joined the gods.

In Greece, Demeter, the goddess of fertility, grieving for her daughter Persephone, who had been abducted by the gloomy Hades, was plunged into such despair and sorrow that the earth ceased to bear fruit. The world was threatened with destruction – but Demeter's boisterous slave-girl, Baubo, bared her body and began to dance. Her dance was so joyful and infectious that Demeter could not help but laugh – and the world was saved.

Wouldn't you agree, reader, that the plots are very similar? Now let us look at the map once more – where is Hellas, and where is the Land of the Rising Sun! And yet, in the myths of peoples close to the Hellenes or the Japanese, there are no such legends.

It is telling that both Vsevolod Miller and Buslaev, whilst being prominent representatives of the 'borrowing' school and the 'sun-and-weather' mythological school, ultimately leaned towards the historical school. This may be explained by external factors as well. In 1871 – the year in which Taylor and Buslaev subjected the mythological school to severe criticism – Heinrich Schliemann discovered the ruins of Troy, celebrated by Homer, on the hill of Hissarlik. A romantic and an amateur who blindly believed in the reality of the events described in Homer's epic poems turned out to be the victor – and the scholars who had mocked his naivety were forced to acknowledge his triumph. Then, in Crete, Evans, Schliemann's colleague, discovered the civilisation of Ancient Crete described in Greek myths, the Labyrinth and the bull's mask of the Minotaur. The excavations – or so it seemed at the time – confirmed the historical basis of Greek legends. And if this

was the case with the Greeks, then other countries too began to reflect on their own epic tales – what if?

But no less significant was the fact that the researchers' departure from the solar-climatic school and the school of borrowing was due to an internal cause – a profound crisis within both schools, of which their leading representatives were well aware.

The late nineteenth century marked the triumph of the historical school.

In fact, a certain historical element in the bylina was evident from the very beginning. Those same mythologists identified within the epic
'younger' bogatyrs – historical heroes who fought historical enemies with earthly weapons, for the earthly, historical Kyiv.

The first specialised work on bylina that focused on their historical basis was Lev Maykov's study 'On the Bylina of the Vladimir Cycle'. It was in this work that the concepts of the 'Kyiv' cycle (bogatyr bylinas centred on Kyiv and the figure of Vladimir Vseslavich) and the 'Novgorod' cycle (bylinas about Sadko and Buslay) were first introduced. It was also in this work that the identification of Vladimir Krasno Solnyshko with Vladimir the Baptist—a development that proved fateful for Russian bylinology—was definitively established. Maykov supplemented this identification with the idea that the bylinic prince represented a sort of
'fusion' of the 'Baptiser of Rus' and Vladimir Monomakh, who lived two centuries later. It is difficult to describe such an idea as anything other than strange – it seems that no one has yet seen, for example, in the 'grey-bearded leader Charles' from the *Song of Roland* any sort of 'fusion' of Charlemagne with his ancestor Charles Martel or his descendant Charles the Bald. It should also be noted that L.N. Maikov understood the 'historicism' of the bylinas in a broad sense: the content of the bylinas is 'fictional, but presented within a setting borrowed from actual history'. It is precisely this 'setting' – the prince's court, his relations with his retinue, feasts and so on – that constitutes the main focus of Maikov's attention and historical study.

In the following early work of a historical nature,
'Russian Bylinas in a Historical and Geographical Context' by N.D. Kvashnina-Samarina, the bylinas are also situated in the era of John the Baptist. This work marks the first appearance of a method that was to become dominant in the historical school – the search for

chronicle prototypes for bylin heroes, relying primarily on the heroes' names.

This method was also employed by N.P. Dashkevich, S.M. Solovyov and N.I. Kostomarov (whose work deserves special mention, as he not only supported Buslaev's idea regarding the identity of the Volkh of the bylinas and the Volkh of Novgorod legends, but also endeavoured to find a historical kernel within these legends), M. Khalansky and others.

This is how the beginnings and foundations of the historical school of Russian bylinology were laid. However, the detailed development of methods for the historical interpretation of the Russian epic is attributed to Vsevolod Miller (brother of the mythologist Orest Miller), whom we are already familiar with. It was he who became the universally recognised head of the historical school and shaped its character for almost a century to come.

It was he who deserves credit for raising the question of the location and social context in which the bylina emerged. He was the first to draw attention to the fact that bylina are almost entirely absent from the lands of Kievan Rus' proper, particularly in Ukraine. They exist, however, almost exclusively in the Russian North.

Unfortunately, this observation was not given the attention it deserved. A firm conviction in the 'all-Russian' origin of bylina and their supposedly once widespread distribution prevented researchers from fully appreciating Miller's observation. Largely on the basis that bylina were once said to have existed throughout Rus', attempts were made to understand why their range had 'narrowed' so considerably. M. Khalansky and S. Shambinago put forward the idea of a Muscovite origin for the bylina, which drew objections from Vsevolod Miller himself. He pointed out that the customs depicted in the bylina – characterised by a fairly relaxed attitude towards the prince and the independence of women – were far removed from 'Tatarised' Moscow.

Yet researchers continued for a long time – right up until the second half of the 20th century – to search, entirely in vain, for 'traces' of the bylina epic in Belarus and Ukraine.

The fate of the so-called
'aristocratic theory of the epic's origin', formulated by Vsevolod Miller. The scholar spoke out strongly against the romantic notion that the epic was created by some faceless
'people', all of whom 'took an equal part in

the exploits', 'each experiencing an exalted and uniformly directed spiritual mood'. 'It turns out that ethnography, let alone history, cannot identify such a people; that such a people is a figment of theory,' wrote Miller. 'It seemed probable and plausible that the Russian peasant in bygone centuries might have created a bogatyr song extolling the exploits of national heroes. And yet, how surprised those same researchers would be if a modern peasant, who had never learnt to read or write, were to respond with an epic song to the exploits of some contemporary Russian commander. The same exaggerated notion exists regarding the people's memory. Everyday experience shows that, in illiterate peasant circles, events that took place a hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago become confused and are thoroughly forgotten.'

Here, dear reader, I shall interrupt the quotation to illustrate Miller's argument with a concrete example. The fate of the legends concerning the Battle of Poltava, recorded in the nineteenth century—that is, exactly one hundred and fifty years later—is highly revealing. In one of them, the outcome of the 'Poltava' battle is decided by a duel between the Cossack Ryzhechka and a giant Swedish duelist, who is clad in iron armour along with his horse[2]. This legend was recorded from a literate and, by all accounts, well-read Cossack; in another, recorded from a peasant, Peter asks permission to go to 'Platava' to fight the Swedes from… 'Grandfather Suvorov' (!!!). The latter does not grant permission until, at the Tsar's invitation, he stands on his right foot and, from this vantage point, sees 'the entire angelic host' in the heavens.

Less than two hundred years elapsed between the event and its, if I may say so, depiction.

'The haphazard transmission of bylinas from generation to generation,' writes V.F. Miller, 'if it had always been merely that, could not have brought down to us the ancient bylinas repertoire not only from distant times, but even from the 16th or 18th centuries.' The researcher concludes that the bylina were 'spread amongst the people' by professional storytellers.

But these are the ways in which bylinas spread amongst the people; their origin, however, is linked to an entirely different milieu, where, accordingly, they were learnt by professional singers. According to Vsevolod Miller, bylin 'poetry always had an aristocratic character; it was, so to speak,

refined literature of the highest, most enlightened class, which was more imbued with national consciousness than other strata of the population… If these epic songs—those of the princes and their retinues—did reach the lower strata of the people, they could only be distorted in that ignorant environment'.

If only the powdered snobs of the early nineteenth century could have heard that it was precisely the peasants, those despised 'Kirshi Danilovs', who preserved the *aristocratic* culture of Ancient Rus'!

This view, however, although it became the accepted norm within the historical school of bylinology, ran so completely counter to the hysterical worship of the people by the Russian intelligentsia – from the Slavophile Khomyakov with his *Semiramis* to the radical Nekrasov with his *The Railway* – – that it was doomed to be a voice crying in the wilderness. And following the seizure of power by the aforementioned intelligentsia – 'ideological and organisational rout', culminating in the humiliating public repentance of one of Vsevolod Miller's finest pupils, Y.M. Sokolov, in 1937 (!).

However, this, and the research of the second half of the twentieth century which definitively confirmed V.F. Miller's correctness, will be discussed in detail below.

The fact that the idea of the 'peasant' or 'folk' origins of the epic arose entirely and wholly in the wild imaginations of our intelligentsia is evident from the fact that, when it comes to, say, the Scandinavian epic, no dispute arises whatsoever. It is confidently attributed to the work of the druzhina, based on precisely those characteristics that Fyodor Buslaev had already noted in the bylina—a boisterous, aggressive temperament of those always seeking a duel, battles between bogatyrs, and a relish for brutal military customs, such as playing with an enemy's head impaled on a spear or the loving description of a horrific wound:

> He shot at so-and-so, the bandit Solov'i,
> And knocked out his right eye with a blow to the temple (kositsa – temple).

All three leading schools of pre-revolutionary bylinology (of which, by the beginning of the 20th century, the historical school held the leading position, whilst the mythological school had almost entirely faded away) had their own strengths

and their own extremes. N.N. Trubitsyn spoke out against these extremes and pointed to the need to unite the efforts of the three leading schools of bylinology. ‘The successful study of bylinic creativity,’ he said, ‘can be… guaranteed only by combining these three principles.’ An article containing these words was published in 1915. A country embroiled in the global meat grinder, hurtling towards monstrous turmoil, had no time for ancient epics, and Trubitsyn’s appeal went unheeded.

Chapter 4
Discussions on the Epic. Soviet Epic Studies

Naturally, with the Bolsheviks' rise to power, the days of the historical school, which had then dominated Russian bylinology, were numbered. The fact that it survived for just over two decades after the revolution can only be explained by the new authorities having other matters to attend to. The very dominance of the historical school in old Russia was, in itself, a death sentence. And then there was the emphatic proclamation of the role of the Old Russian aristocracy as the creators of the epic, and of the people as its rather lacklustre custodians… This was in a country where aristocracy was being eradicated – along with its bearers – from all spheres of life, from life itself, whilst the 'people' were turned into an idol (alongside the extermination of tens of millions of people who
'people' comprised, and the destruction of their way of life).

As early as 1909, *Burevestnik*—the mouthpiece of the country's future rulers—erupted with what was perhaps the pinnacle of the Russian intelligentsia's adulation of the people: an illiterate and hysterical article with a title that sounded like a medical diagnosis: 'The Destruction of the Individual'. In it, he defended, with unprecedented aggression, the age-old romantic theses about the 'creative people':

'Only when the entire people think as one is it possible to create such broad generalisations, such brilliant symbols as Prometheus, Satan (! – *L. P.*), Heracles, Svyatogor, Ilya, Mikula and hundreds of other monumental generalisations of the people's life experience. The power of collective creativity is most clearly demonstrated by the fact that, over the course of hundreds of centuries, individual creativity has produced nothing comparable to the Iliad or the Kalevala."

Just how well Alexei Maximovich understood what he was writing is evident from the fact that he classified Prometheus—glorified by the intellectual Aeschylus—as part of 'folk creativity' (in the folk mythology of the Hellenes, this character is a petty, thieving rogue and mischief-maker, whilst fire is given to people by the blacksmith-god Hephaestus), Homer's individual creations – the *Iliad* and the *Kalevala* – and the author's own poem, based on

Karelian runes created by Lönnrot. One cannot help but wonder why Shota Rustaveli's *The Knight in the Tiger's Skin*—which many Georgian peasants knew by heart—or, say, Dante's *Divine Comedy* are not classified as folk literature. And just how well he really knew and respected the Russian people is evident from the fact that he managed to place Satan on a par with Svyatogor, Ilya Muromets and Mikula Selyaninovich!

And it was this very man who became a pioneer in the new, 'proletarian' literary criticism.

One cannot help but be struck by the civic and scholarly courage of those academics who, under the appalling conditions of 'the collective mindset of the entire nation', defended scientific truth: the bylina 'is by no means a product of the peasant class's creativity. The latter is merely the heir to other social groups. The peasantry can hardly be credited with the creation of even a single bylin plot… The most significant aspect of this peasant reworking is the transformation of the most important bylin hero, Ilya Muromets, into the son of a peasant from the village of Karacharovo in the town of Murom, instead of the former Muravlenin'. B.M. Sokolov, who wrote these lines in 1929, believed that the reason for this transformation was the Cossack Ilya Ivanovich Korovin from near Murom, whom we are already familiar with.

But the years when such things could be said and written with impunity were rapidly drawing to a close. The last person to criticise the historical school from an academic standpoint was A.F. Skaftymov of Saratov.

After that, people began to 'speak differently' to its representatives.

I agree, dear reader, with those who believe that Stalin, who in those years was consolidating power in the fledgling Soviet state, was a genius. But even for a genius, the task he set himself was insurmountable – just as the problem of the perpetual motion machine would have been insurmountable for him or anyone else. Stalin attempted to build an empire, the Russian state, on the basis of the inherently anti-national and anti-state ideas of Marx and Engels. The task required him to turn to the roots, to the origins of Russian culture – and the leader did turn to them. But the ideology left no room for the ideas of the aristocracy and demanded that the title of 'creator' be reserved solely for

‘the people’. And Stalin set about solving this intractable problem with all the vigour and tireless tenacity that characterised him.

The ‘discussion on the epic’, which unfolded at the leader’s instigation in the Soviet press in the mid-1930s, brought any research into the origins of the bylina to a standstill for many decades. It was decided to regard them as ‘folk creativity’ – and that was that. The ‘theory’ – which in reality was merely an acknowledgement of the fact – that the bylin epic originated with princes and their retinues was shelved for many years. Rybakov, in his debate with Propp, noted that there was one trait he shared with his rival: a resolute rejection of the ‘aristocratic theory of the epic’s origin’. Even when Soviet scholars stumbled upon facts that once again confirmed Vsevolod Miller’s correctness, nothing changed.

In the dismantling of the old historical school, perhaps the only positive outcome was that, along with it, the notion of an exclusive link between the bylina and the Kievan, or even the Muscovite, state collapsed. This cleared the way for research into pre-state antiquity in the bylina.

‘The Russians had an epic long before the formation of the Kievan state. Its heyday falls within the Kievan era. Just as Soviet historians do not begin Russian history with the formation of Kievan Rus’, we cannot begin the history of the Russian epic with the formation of the Kievan cycle of bylina,’ wrote V. Ya. Propp in his work
The Russian Heroic Epic.

Nowadays, Vladimir Yakovlevich’s students and followers sometimes portray his confrontation with Boris Alexandrovich Rybakov as a sort of clash between a free-thinking scholar, unencumbered by ideology, and a Stalinist academic bureaucrat. Of course, this is not the case. Propp was just as much a product of his time and his country as Rybakov was. And it remains to be seen which of the two scholars followed the dictates of the age more zealously.

Here, Propp is in a hurry to clear ‘the people’ of any suspicion of idealism and mysticism. ‘In the bylina, there is no longer any direct belief in werewolfism; it is used merely as a poetic device.’ This refers to the bylina about Volga-Volkh. As for Sadko: ‘The figure of the Sea Tsar is no longer an object of belief. He is a poetic personification of the sea.’

Belief in werewolves has not disappeared to this day – sober and sensible people, on the whole, used to tell the author’s grandmother

that she would transform into a she-bear and a black cat. And back in the days when the bylinas were being recorded, this belief was universal – at the very least, amongst those who sang the bylinas. And what sort of ‘poetic device’ can we speak of when Volkh first catches fish in his nets by turning into a pike, and then transforms his army into ants in order to scale the enemy’s fortress? A ‘poetic device’ is when, in *The Tale of Igor’s Campaign*, Yaroslavna says she will ‘fly like a cuckoo across the Danube’ – even though she does not transform into anything or fly anywhere. It is when Yaroslavna’s husband, Prince Igor, ‘flew like a falcon’ from Polovtsian captivity, whilst his companion and accomplice, the Polovtsian Ovlur, ‘ran like a wolf’ – one might still speak of a ‘poetic device’ – although
‘The Word’ is cast a shadow by ‘real’ werewolves such as Veles’s grandson Boyan or the sorcerer-prince Vseslav of Polotsk. As late as the nineteenth century, Russian peasants were still sacrificing horses to the ‘poetic personification of the sea’ – animals which, shall we say, were by no means superfluous on the farm. He was invoked in the incantations of folk healers (‘King of the Waters and Queen of the Waters, grant us water for good health’), and it was to him, alongside the rulers of Earth and Heaven, that the Russian peasant would ask for forgiveness before falling asleep:

> ‘King of the Sea,
> King of the Earth,
> King of the Heavens—
> forgive my sinful little soul.”

If all this is not faith – then what is faith?

Apart from materialism, the scholar ‘enriched’ the bylina with progressivism (‘the epic… looks to the future’) and, of course, class consciousness (‘Ilya’s awareness of his class affiliation is awakened’). The latter, to be honest, has absolutely no connection with Marx’s theory of classes, since the wandering warrior Ilya has no connection whatsoever with the means of production and, consequently, cannot belong to any ‘class’—he is a typical ‘declassed element’. Moreover. In the two epics where Propp saw fit to discern class struggle (‘Ilya’s Quarrel with Vladimir’ and ‘Khoten Bludovich’), the main characters turn out to be masters of serfs—‘parobki’. That is to say – horror of horrors! – they belong to the class of… slave-owners!

However, dear reader, let us leave the analysis of such absurdities to Propp's seminal work. Let us merely note that Rybakov, whilst not always refraining from far-fetched interpretations, did not bend such an ancient epic to fit the 'party line' to such an extent. However, as Vladimir Yakovlevich himself wrote in the preface to another work, 'we shall not blame them for these errors – they were made by the greatest scholars; the fact is that they could not think otherwise, that their thoughts were conditioned by the era in which they lived and the class to which they belonged'.

What is of greater interest to us, dear reader, are the traces of primitive antiquity that Propp identified in the bylina. These include, without doubt, the tribal nature of the wars of Volga-Volkh, the depiction of funeral rites in the bylin about Mikhail Potyka, and so on. However, even this barrel is not without a fly in the ointment – often, having made a strikingly accurate and apt observation, the researcher immediately offers an equally striking interpretation of it. Thus, having examined a number of bylinas about matchmaking ('Ivan Godinovich', the aforementioned 'Mikhail Potyk', 'The Danube'), Propp correctly concludes that the epics strongly condemn marriage to foreign women and approve of marriage amongst 'one's own kind' – endogamy, to use the scientific term. Yet, having made this observation, Propp for some reason concludes that these bylinas reflect the formation *of the* Russian *state*. However, a state *is not* endogamous! It is a tribe that is endogamous. The feature of the bylinas uncovered by Propp takes us deep into the past – to the times when a tribe was forming from separate clans.

By refraining from searching for historical specifics in the bylinas in the manner of Vsevolod Miller and his disciples, Propp discovered many such very ancient features in the epic that his predecessors had neglected, or indeed failed to notice at all. But that very refusal – the refusal to date the bylina at all – prevented the researcher from properly assessing the significance of his findings.

His followers did not correct, but rather compounded their teacher's errors – I am referring first and foremost to Boris Putilov himself.

It is worth noting two interesting works that appeared shortly after the publication of Propp's *The Russian Heroic Epic*.

I.P. Tsapenko, in his book *Questions Concerning the Development of the Heroic Epic of the Eastern Slavs* (1963), drew primarily on the methods of the historical school. Yet his study of the relationships between the heroes of the bylina led him to conclude that the bylina originated before the Middle Ages, during the era of military democracy. 'No one can prove,' wrote the Kyiv

researcher, ‘that there was no leader in Kyiv by the name of Vladimir who lived during the pre-princely period.’ Such
‘attack on the foundations’ did not go unnoticed. The reaction from the founders of the new historical school was not long in coming. Academician Rybakov wrote about Tsapenko’s work in a tone that was far from academic: ‘The followers of V. Ya. Propp (? – *L. P.*) agreed (?! – *L. P.*) to the extent that, in their endeavour to trace the entire epic back to a deep primal state, they began to doubt the identity of the bylinic Vladimir with Vladimir Svyatoslavich’. Rybakov’s follower, Mikhail Plisetsky, was somewhat more restrained; incidentally, he did not count Tsapenko amongst Propp’s followers. However, he too spoke more emotionally than on the basis of evidence: Tsapenko cast doubt on the identity of ‘*even* (! – *L. P.*) the bylinic Vladimir with Vladimir Svyatoslavich’.

However, apart from emotions and strong words (‘agreed as far as’, ‘striving to lead astray’, ‘even’), both distinguished scholars had little to set against Tsapenko’s doubts. And, as we shall see, reader, there are grounds for these doubts, and considerable ones at that. It is no coincidence that the orthodox ‘historian’ D.S. Likhachev wrote around the same time:

‘Epic social relations do not entirely correspond to the characteristics of life in the Kyiv period and are depicted in terms typical of an *earlier* (my emphasis – *L. P.*) period.’ However, the scholar left it at that.

In 1965, the geochemist V.V. Cherdyncev completed his work *Features of the Primitive Communal System in Bylinas*. Using a whole series of examples, it demonstrated that the society depicted in the bylinas generally belongs to pre-state times. But even more valuable than the individual findings was the method of researching and dating bylinas formulated by Cherdyncev: ‘It is necessary to identify those features of the social order which are contained in the motifs and plots of the bylinas, but do not define them, and which may therefore persist as the epic evolves. Such features include kinship relations, marriage conditions (recall the endogamy found in bylinas. – *L. P.*), groupings of social forces, certain elements of the ideology of bylin heroes, and the circumstances of death and burial’. Conversely, according to the researcher, features that persisted from primitive times to the ‘era of capitalism’ could not assist in dating the bylins. These include all manner of

divination (whether by Volkh, Vseslavich or Marinka Kaidalovna), prophetic dreams (those of Tsaritsa Azvyagovna in the same epic about Volkh), attacks by enemies, and the payment of tribute.

Unfortunately, the ‘experts’ disregarded the geochemist’s work; not even Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp’s favourable review was of any help. His work lay unpublished in the archives for many years and only saw the light of day after the scholar’s death, in 1998, when professional historians and folklorists confirmed many of its author’s findings and discoveries.

The crowning achievement and pinnacle of Propp’s school could be considered

The History of the Bylinas by Igor Yakovlevich Froyanov and Yuri Ivanovich Yudin – but this represents, rather, a new stage in bylinology, and we, the reader, shall examine it separately.

Somewhat later, following V.Y. Propp’s seminal work, another researcher turned his attention to the bylina: B.A. Rybakov—who has already appeared on these pages on more than one occasion—and who was to revive Vsevolod Miller’s historical school, naturally without the slightest hint of the bylina’s aristocratic origins. It is interesting to note that his first engagement with the bylina follows the line of Maikov’s works rather than Miller’s. It seems that, for the first time, the archaeologist compared the burials of the Rus’ people from the 9th–11th centuries, known from excavations, with the description of a bogatyr’s burial in the bylina about Mikhail Potyka. It turned out that this bylin contains an almost literal and very precise description of an ancient rite. Incidentally, this would have been a brilliant argument against Propp’s idea of the continuous evolution of the epic – what was the point of describing, century after century, a rite that had long since disappeared? It contained neither patriotism nor ‘class struggle’.

Alas, soon afterwards, in the heat of the debate with Propp and his supporters, B.A. Rybakov strayed from this promising path, preferring the slippery slope of seeking chronicle prototypes for the heroes of the bylina. This was reflected in full force in his seminal study *Ancient Rus’. Legends. Bylina. Chronicles’, published in 1963.

Let us consider, dear reader, one example of this search for prototypes – Rybakov himself apparently considered it so successful that, twenty-four years later, he repeated it in the educational

textbook *Russian Folk Poetry* precisely as an example of research into the historical background of bylina.

'The bylina about the victory over Tugarin Zmeevich has long been associated with the victory of Vladimir Monomakh and Svyatopolk over the Polovtsian khan Tugorkan in 1096. In the bylinas about Tugarin, the action often takes place in the prince's palace, where the khan [?! the bylina never refers to Tugarin as a khan. – *L. P.*] sits beside the prince and princess or embraces Princess Apraksa. The real Tugorkan married the Grand Prince's daughter in 1094 and, as a son-in-law, could indeed have sat between Svyatopolk and his daughter – his wife. The widow of Emperor Henry IV, Eupraxia, did indeed return to Rus' during these years to her brother Vladimir Monomakh (c. 1097). The epic portrayal of the frivolous and easily swayed princess Apraksa coincides entirely with the accounts in the German chronicles, where Eupraxia was called a 'royal harlot'…

The chronicle for the year 1097 states… that Tugorkan's ally, Bonyak, evidently for the purpose of divination, began to howl like a wolf on the steppe, 'and a wolf joined him, and many wolves began to howl'. The epic has not forgotten the wolves:

> And there rides Tugarin – oh yes,
> Zmeevits! Ahead of him, two grey wolves
> are howling.

In no other epic with a different plot are accompanying wolves mentioned. A set of chronological indicators (Vladimir Monomakh, Tugorkan, Eupraxia Vsevolodovna, the Polovtsian khan at the princely table, the victory over the 'serpent', the wolves) allows us to reliably link the bylina about Tugarin with events of the 1090s that were significant for Rus'.

If I were in the late academician's place, reader, I would have been wary (not to say ashamed) of putting forward such an 'interpretation', let alone doing so twice. It simply invites the scathing criticism to which B.N. Putilov subjected it. It is clear that the whole argument is based on the opening phrase stating that this bylin 'has long been associated with the victory… over Tugorkan'. In other words, the search for evidence is undertaken as if the answer were already known. This identification is indeed a long-standing one – even Propp could not avoid it. It is also evident that the whole argument rests on

the similarity between the names Tugarin and Tugorkan. The Tugarin of the bylinas is neither a prince nor a
'tsar', as the leaders of the steppe enemy Tatars are called in the epics. He has no army. He is not a relative of the princess, but her 'dear friend'. Tugorkan, incidentally, was Svyatopolk's father-in-law, not his son-in-law: 'they found Tugorkan dead, and Svyatopolk took him as his father-in-law'. In the end, it is not a prince but a bogatyr who defeats him. So, apart from the similarity in sound, Tugarin and Tugorkan have nothing in common. And if we recall that the name Tugarin was a common *Old Russian* name right up to and including the 16th century, that in one version of the tale of Maria Marevna the main character—the tsarevich—is called by this name, and that the name itself is derived quite clearly from the Old Russian
'tuga' – grief, sorrow (this was the name of a Croatian princess, from which our
'tuzhit') – then the last link between Tugarin and Tugorkan crumbles.

As for the wolves, there is really nothing to say – the stretch is simply glaringly obvious; however, it must be noted that, contrary to Rybakov's claim, another hero of the bylinas – the Sokolnik – DOES have wolf companions.

The situation is no better with 'Evpraksia'—Apraksa. Any significance she might have for dating this bylina is negated by the fact that she is Vladimir's wife (not his sister!) in the vast majority of bylinas in the Kyiv cycle and has no particular connection to this specific plot.
She is called 'Korolevishna' because she is the daughter of the 'Lyakhovetsky' ('Politovsky',
'Pomoryansky') king. We shall discuss her 'frivolity' below; for now, let us simply note that here, too, there is nothing in common with the 'royal harlot' of the Western chronicles. In the bylina, there is no 'Vladimir Monomakh, Tugorkhan, Eupraxia Vsevolodovna, or a Polovtsian khan at the prince's table'.

Rybakov did not deny the existence of a pre-Doki epic among the Rus' and even identified what he presumed to be its main themes (the wars of the Ants – whom he regarded as the ancestors of the Rus' – against the 'wife-ruled' Sarmatians, Goths and Huns – the 'Khinov'); but in the bylina he 'recognised' its remnants only in those extremely rare instances when even his method—which, as you, the reader, may have observed, was rather loose—failed to trace them back to their chronicle 'prototypes'.

Unfortunately, the majority of B.A. Rybakov's followers also followed the very same path that the historian and philologist Vadim Kozhinov bitingly but accurately compared to the behaviour of a drunkard searching for a lost wallet not where he lost it, but where it is brighter to look.

However, not all of them. In their article ‘On the Question of the Time of Composition of the Bylinas’, R.S. Lipets and M.G. Rabinovich once again—apparently independently of V.V. Cherdyncev—formulated the principles for dating the foundations of the bylinas epic: ‘It is difficult to imagine that artificially archaic terms could have been introduced into the bylins. Therefore, when early and late terms occur, preference for chronological dating should be given to the earlier term.’ The scholars demonstrated that the bylins very accurately and even
‘affectionately’ the armament of a warrior of Ancient Rus’, and not just any warrior, but a mounted armoured warrior, a druzhinnik. Moreover, the axe—the primary weapon of the communal militiaman from almost as far back as the Ants period right up to 1812—is not even mentioned as a weapon in the bylins. This, incidentally, coincides with the conclusions of scholars who, based on references to the use of the axe in pre-Mongol Rus’, conclude that the nobility regarded it as a lowly weapon and used it only against rebellious serfs and wild animals whilst hunting. The second weapon, the most natural one for a militiaman—the hunting spear or rogatina—is mentioned only in the hands
the ‘sons-in-law’ of Solovey the Robber, who attack Ilya Muromets, and by no means by the bogatyrs.

This observation by researchers can be extended further. The militiaman’s third weapon, the bow, is mentioned mainly in connection with hunting and contests. In battle, it is used by Ilya Muromets (before joining the bogatyr retinue, against the werewolf Solov’i) and Vasily the Drunkard, a man by no means belonging to the circle of bogatyrs.

It is interesting to note that the first to observe this was none other than the author of *Russian Fairy Tales*, Vasily Alekseyevich Levshin: ‘Russian bogatyrs considered it a disgrace to fight with anything other than hand-to-hand weapons, for they did not regard killing with a sling or an arrow as befitting a brave man.’ In the bylina, this aversion seems to extend to all types of projectile weapons, and to the very act of throwing itself. Only a foreign enemy, such as Idolishche, or a scoundrel, such as Tugarin, is capable of hurling a knife at an opponent – and even then, a bogatyr, having intercepted or parried a blade thrown at him, never throws it back at the attacker, but challenges the assailant to a duel or dispatches him with a blow. Russian bogatyrs strike even where it would be more natural to hurl a weapon – *Khoten* Bludovich smashes the ridgepole of the Chusovs’ house, his enemies, with a blow rather than *a throw* of his spear. As for the daughter of the bandit Solovey, standing at the gate and attempting to

kill Ilya with a love-spell log or by some other means, is killed by the bogatyr not *with a throw*, but *with a blow* from his spear. It is interesting to note that the chronicle also preserves the view held by the prince's retinue regarding the particular baseness and ignobility of throwing: when, at the Lyubech Congress, the baseness of Prince Davyd—who had lured Prince Vasilko of Terebovlia into a trap and blinded him—is discussed, they say to him, 'You threw a knife at us!'. Just as in the bylina, a thrown knife is a sign of treachery and baseness.

Together with the epic's detailed descriptions of druzhina burials from the 9th to the 11th centuries, these arguments serve not only to establish a date –

'chronological dating', according to Lipets's cumbersome definition, places the bylinas no earlier than the 11th century. Such a profound understanding of the druzhina's way of life as depicted in the bylinas allows us to bury once and for all the theory of the epic's 'peasant' origins as an ideological myth created by the democrats and the Slavophiles who were not far removed from them (anyone who does not believe this may look to Khomyakov's *Semiramis*, by Khomyakov, where the author, apparently wishing to praise the Slavs, describes with admiration their… 'plebeianism' and 'democratic spirit'). 'This accuracy and meticulousness in recreating military life testify to the epic's origins in the druzhina milieu, and certainly not in a peasant one, where such detailed and "intimate" knowledge of all the realities of weaponry could not have existed.'

The chronological aspect of bylinic weaponry can be explored in greater depth. In the bylinas, 'the sword is mentioned alongside the sabre'. But when a bylinic hero puts an unfaithful fiancée or wife to death ('Ivan Godinovich', 'Churilo and Katerina'), he usually says, 'I married my sabre with its sharp edge'. It is clear. It is more natural to 'marry off' a masculine object – that is, a sword. It was, evidently, originally in the place of the sabre in these episodes. The sabre, on the other hand, is as much of an outsider in the epic as the 'flintlock rifles' in the oldest bylin about Volkh or the arrow that enters the enemy's side and emerges from the other… as a bullet.

Following R.S. Lipets's highly detailed work *The Epic and Ancient Rus*, the druzhina origins of the bylina should be regarded not as a theory, but as a definitively proven scientific fact, which can only be disregarded by turning a blind eye to reality 'for lofty ideological reasons'. Which is precisely what Soviet bylinology did.

We shall not dwell on this aspect of Lipets's work – everything has already been said. We are more in need of a well-developed and in-depth methodology

for identifying the earliest layers in the bylina. ‘One means of chronologising the bylina may be the study of the realities depicted within them, which allow us to establish a lower limit (horizon) beyond which the bylina could not have arisen in the form in which they have come down to us… of particular importance in this regard are the almost unchanged
‘common motifs’ are particularly important in this respect. Much has been done in this regard, but it is still far from sufficient; moreover, much requires revision.” ‘If a particular concept or term has found its way into the bylina and, moreover, has become firmly established, this means that the bylina was composed no later than the time when the object or phenomenon it denotes was in use: the bow, the gridnitsa, burial in a log cabin, and so on.’ ‘The *most ancient* terms and concepts are important for chronological dating.’

And in that the work R.S. Lipets writes, that ‘social relations in the bylina, and indeed the setting in which they are set, seem *to date from an earlier period* than they did in the young state of Vladimir Svyatoslavich’. Accordingly, the conclusion is drawn: ‘*By the end of the 10th century, a rich epic tradition already existed*. Even in the time of Igor and Olga, and perhaps as early as the 9th century, epic tales had taken their place in the cultural life of Rus’’. And following this, the researcher goes on to discuss the bylina as a reflection the era Vladimir Svyatoslavich’s and even Vladimir Monomakh.The caution of the scholar, which borders into inconsistency? A reluctance to break with familiar frameworks – even whilst realising their complete untenability? A fear of the reaction from the ‘academic community’? The latter, incidentally, is by no means insignificant. Let us recall how Tsapenko’s work was received – after which, incidentally, the Kyiv-based researcher disappeared entirely from academic publications.

Another major work of the Soviet period in bylinology was S.I. Dmitrieva’s book *The Geographical Distribution of Russian Bylinas*. Having carefully studied all the data on the locations where bylina were recorded, the customs of the local population and even their anthropological characteristics, Dmitrieva concluded that the surviving bylina are associated solely with settlers whose ancestors came from the Novgorod lands. ‘Where settlers from the Nizov region of the Rostov-Suzdal lands predominated, there are no bylins; this allows us to draw the important conclusion that in the 14th–15th centuries (a time of increased peasant colonisation) there were no bylins in the Rostov-Suzdal lands.’ Thus, on the Tersk coast of the Kola Peninsula, collectors

noted a peculiarity: the inhabitants of the village of Ponoi did not know a single bylina, whilst their neighbours had dozens of bylinas recorded. The mystery was easily solved: Ponoi was home to the 'Moscowites' – descendants of settlers from the Rostov-Suzdal region of the Volga. Even centuries of living alongside the Pomors, descendants of the Novgorodians, did not help the settlers from the Moscow lands to become familiar with the bylin epic tradition. Russian bylinas turned out to be the epic of Novgorod. In Siberia, too, bylinas were recorded precisely where settlers from the Novgorod regions lived.

Not all researchers accepted Dmitrieva's discovery – the notion of a 'pan-Russian epic' was simply too deeply ingrained. It was pointed out that bylina were, they claimed, also known to the Don Cossacks – surely they hadn't picked them up from the Pomors!

Yet amongst the fragmentary, faded Don 'bylinas' – or, more precisely, songs based on bylinas' plots – there is not a single one that is truly their own, Don Cossack in origin. Instead, there is a song about… Sadko! It is clear that this song reached the Don precisely from Novgorod, and therefore the other plots could well have arrived by the same route. Fortunately, Rus' merchants from the north of Eastern Europe had been travelling along the Volga route since time immemorial, even before the Rurikid era. The 'ushkuyniki' also travelled this route – just how quickly and easily these daring men found common ground with the Don Cossacks is beautifully described in the bylina 'Vasily Buslaev Went to Pray'. Finally, during the Schism, many Old Believers from the Russian North sought refuge from the Moscow 'antichrists' on the free Don. Conversely, Old Believers from the Don would undertake pilgrimages to the northern 'sanctuary of ancient piety'. The Cossack Timofey Razya also undertook such a pilgrimage with his young son, Stenka. Brave men from the Don defended the Solovetsky Monastery against the tsarist army. So there were many paths.

Moreover, the Cossack historian E.P. Savelyev recounts that as early as the beginning of the 20th century, the descendants of the people of Novgorod and Khlynov, who had fled the Moscow yoke, stood out amongst the Don, Kuban, Volga and Ural Cossacks in terms of their appearance, speech and customs. And Savelyev cites the preservation within this group of songs based on epic tales as one piece of evidence for the northern origins of this section of the Cossacks.

Incidentally, cultural elements are found on the Don not only of Novgorod or Khlynov origin, but also such that

link the Cossacks to the vanished world of the Slavic Baltic. For instance, in the 17th century, an ataman named Sambur lived on the Don. And the last Slavic ruler of the island of Rügen was called Sambor.

Another objection raised by Dmitrieva's opponents boils down to the claim that there were, they say, 'Volga centres of the epic tradition'. Yet, they argue, for some reason, no bylinas have survived in Novgorod itself or its environs.

It seems that researchers have completely forgotten about the devastation of Veliky Novgorod that followed the conquest of the free city by Moscow. It was not for nothing that N.I. Kostomarov called this period the 'Novgorod catastrophe' – 'from Zavolotchye to… the German frontier and the Lithuanian border, warriors scattered, burning, killing and taking captives. Strictly speaking, this cannot be called a war – the troops met no resistance: they struck down the unarmed, the defenceless, the meek'. Following this widespread massacre across the entire region, the defeated were forcibly resettled to the lands of Moscow: '…more than a thousand merchant families and the children of boyars were expelled from Novgorod and settled in Pereyaslavl, Vladimir, Yuryev, Murom, Rostov, Kostroma and Nizhny Novgorod.

A few days later, the Muscovite army drove more than seven thousand families into the Moscow region, in winter, in the freezing cold, without giving them time to gather their belongings or allowing them to take anything with them; their homes, their immovable and movable property – all became the property of the Grand Prince."

Many of those exiled died on the way; the survivors were resettled in various towns, estates and villages throughout the Moscow region; the boyars' children were granted estates in the Nizhny region, whilst Muscovites were sent to settle in the Novgorod region in their place. And so, in place of the merchants exiled to the Moscow region, new merchants from the Moscow region were sent to Novgorod.

The reprisals did not end there. In 1484, the Grand Prince… ordered the arrest of the boyars and boyarinas of Veliky Novgorod… some, on suspicion, were imprisoned, whilst others were granted estates in the southern and Volga regions…

In 1487, following a denunciation by Yakov Zakharich, the governor, Ivan removed fifty families of the city's leading citizens from Novgorod and resettled them in Vladimir. The following year… Ivan ordered the deportation of a further seven thousand residents to Moscow and resettled them in various towns and villages. The estates belonging to the prince and the boyars were distributed amongst the

sons of the boyars. The following year, Ivan transferred all the remaining free men (landowners) to Nizhny Novgorod, whilst ordering many of them to be put to death in Moscow: they had complained about the governors, and this was held against them, on the grounds that they had intended to kill the governor.

Thus did the Moscow sovereign destroy Novgorod and almost wipe a distinct northern people from the face of the earth. The majority of the population in the volosts was exterminated during two devastating campaigns. The entire city was depopulated. The place of the expelled old-timers was taken by new settlers from the Moscow and Nizov lands. Landowners who had not perished during the devastation were also almost all evicted; others fled to Lithuania. The remnants of the former people among the peasantry mingled with the new Muscovite population that had poured in: it is hardly surprising, then, that Novgorod did not, as it might seem, quickly come to terms with its fate and forget its past. The descendants of free men, scattered across foreign lands, had no roots from which to draw memories of the past, and were bound by necessity to dissolve into the mass of the predominant Muscovite population; whilst the descendants of the new settlers in the Novgorod district and in the city itself had nothing in common with the old ways…

All that remained of the past was the land; but the old soul could not be instilled into a new body alien to it'.

To what Kostomarov has said, one may add Gerbenstein's account of Novgorod: 'The people here were once highly educated and honest, but have now become the most depraved, having undoubtedly been infected by the Moscow corruption brought here by the Muscovites who came to this place.' On Pskov: 'The education and gentle manners of the people of Pskov have been replaced by Muscovite manners, which are worse in almost every respect. For in their commercial dealings, the people of Pskov displayed such honesty, sincerity and simplicity that the price of their goods was stated without being asked, and without any verbosity intended to deceive the buyer' (Quoted from: Plekhanov, G.V. History of Russian Social Thought. Book One. Moscow–Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1925. p. 91). The matter, as we have seen, was not one of 'contamination by Moscow's corruption' nor, as Plekhanov naively believed, that 'the triumph of Eastern customs led to… the spread of Eastern mores' (ibid.), but simply a change in the people.

Kostomarov provided an exhaustive response to those who doubted Dmitrieva's discovery. In Novgorod and its environs, the 'volosts', there was simply no one left to preserve the bylina. I would add that following the monstrous devastation – I have no hesitation in using the word 'genocide' – which he described, a plague swept through the Novgorod region, and a hundred years later, the Oprichnina. On the other hand, the 'Volga centres of the bylin tradition' emerged precisely in the places where the Muscovites resettled the people of Novgorod. Moreover, to refer to the areas where bylinas were performed in the Volga region as 'centres' is simply to mislead the reader – one cannot help but imagine something comparable to the Russian North, untouched by the invasion of Muscovite 'Asianism'. In reality, there can be no question of any such comparison – neither in quantitative terms (the difference in the number of records is by more than an order of magnitude), nor in qualitative terms (in the Volga region, people performed half-forgotten, distorted, and at times incomplete fragments of bylinas, or simply retold them as best they could). If one is to use the same conceptual framework, then in the Volga region, unlike in the North, there were not 'foci' but rather 'sparks'.

Finally, references to Popovich and Buslay in the Moscow Nikon Chronicle, 'Elie Morovline' by Lyasotta, who visited Lithuania, and Ilya Muravlenin with Solovy Budimirovich in the work of the Lithuanian Filon Kmyta – all these appear in the 16th century. This was after the sacking of Novgorod, when some were driven off to the Moscow lands under escort (scenes seemingly copied from the era of the dekulakisation and Bolshevik terror), whilst others fled to Lithuania.

B.A. Rybakov, who readily accepted Dmitrieva's discovery, explained the preservation of the bylinas in the Novgorod milieu by reference to a chronicle account of garrisons comprising Novgorodians, Vyatichi, Krivichians and Chuds, stationed in fortified posts along the Pecheneg border of Rus' on the rivers of the Left Bank of the Dnieper – the Sula, the Ostre, the Stugna and the Desna. Boris Alexandrovich identified these fortresses with the epic heroes' outposts. However, the scholar failed to explain, firstly, why there are no, or almost no, epics in the lands of the Vyatichi, and in particular the Krivichians and the Chud. Secondly, nowhere is it stated that these garrisons – which, amongst other things, must surely have been severely depleted by the 'ceaseless' warfare with the Pechenegs – returned to their homeland, travelling all the way across Eastern Europe! And finally, thirdly, Rybakov's theory in no way explains the complete absence of bylinas in precisely those regions where the battles celebrated in them

against the Pechenegs and Polovtsians. Yet it certainly cannot be said that Ukrainian folklore has a short memory – there are songs here about Perun and Dazhbog, and a carol about a prince who led a campaign against Tsargrad and refused to accept gold as a bribe (a memory of Sviatoslav?), as well as legends about the death of Igor Rurikovich in the land of the Drevlians and about the bloody baptism of Rus'.

Another of Dmitrieva's discoveries attracted far less attention. In the regions where bylinas were most widely spread, she discovered a distinction between 'high' and 'low', 'senior' and 'junior' clans that had survived into the 20th century. This division, which inevitably brings to mind the 'old branch' and 'younger branch' of the Russian chronicles, resembled the coexistence of patrician and plebeian families in Ancient Rome. The clans that had first arrived in the region were considered the 'senior' ones. Brides from these clans were regarded as the most sought-after, and a bride's lineage could easily outweigh both her appearance and the size of her dowry. When the young women performed the 'krugi' – a ritual procession round the village on the patronal feast day of Posol'on, moving clockwise whilst singing special songs performed only on that day – the leading places in the procession were reserved for the young women from the 'senior clans'. Differences in parental status were only significant amongst young women from 'junior' families.

It was precisely this 'clan nobility' that served as the main custodians of the bylinas. Together with the research of R.S. Lipets and M.G. Rabinovich, the link between high social status and the performance of bylinas, discovered by Dmitrieva, definitively elevates the aristocratic origins of the bylinas from the realm of theory to that of scientific fact. Even in the North, even in the 20th century, the bylinas remained the preserve of the nobility. The researcher puts forward an interesting hypothesis regarding the connection
'eldest lineages' and the 'urban elite' that had settled in the land – the Novgorod druzhina.

Another outstanding researcher of Russian bylina during the Soviet era was Vadim Kozhinov. His series of articles 'The History of Rus' and the Russian Word', published in the journal *Nash Sovremennik* and subsequently reprinted several times as a separate book, effectively sums up the entire Soviet period of bylinology. Unfortunately, the astute observations and sound ideas in this work were intertwined with the prejudices of the author, an Orthodox Eurasianist and statesman, –

into a convoluted knot. He accepted Dmitrieva's discovery and even expanded upon it, linking the bylina to the earliest colonisation of the Russian North—not yet that of Novgorod, but that of Ladoga. However, even this observation is reduced by the author—a statesman—to yet another attempt to prove the 'nation-wide' significance of the bylinas. Kozhinov himself explains the 'preservation' in the North of the 'all-Russian' epic by the fact that in 'peaceful' North, far from the turbulent political life of the 12th–17th centuries, memories of the past were not, so to speak, overshadowed by new, vivid impressions. One gets the impression that Kozhinov did not read Dmitrieva's book properly. Such an explanation might make some sense from a geographical perspective, but it explains nothing regarding the connection between the bylina and people from Novgorod in particular. Back when Vsevolod Miller discovered that the bylinas were confined to the Russian North, the Slavophile Gilferding attempted to explain the 'preservation' of the bylinas in these regions by a certain 'remoteness' – and Kozhinov, in essence, repeats his arguments. But Dmitrieva had already responded to Gilferding's arguments. On the one hand, the researcher noted, life in the Russian North was by no means so isolated or devoid of experiences. It was from here that warriors set out onto the ice of Lake Peipus, under the banners of Andrei and Alexander Yaroslavich. It was here that Delagardi's marauding mercenaries roamed during the Time of Troubles in the Muscovite state. It was here that the terrible storms of the Schism raged. On the other hand, places truly untouched by either political upheavals or Western culture – such as Polesia, to which ethnographers still travelled in the mid-20th century in search of ancient, even Indo-European archaisms – for some reason 'did not preserve' the epic tradition.

Indeed, can the life of the Russian Cossacks really be considered quiet, isolated and peaceful, devoid of new experiences? Ermak and Razin, active participation in the Time of Troubles and the Siege of Azov, the Schism itself, Kondraty Bulavin and Peter the Great's ferocious 'de-Cossackisation', the ceaseless wars with nomads and raids 'for sheepskin coats' in the Transcaucasus and Persia, and participation in the campaigns of Suvorov and Kutuzov – for some reason, none of this prevented the Cossacks from remembering the bylinas.

However, Kozhinov's observation regarding the storytellers' regard for the bylinas as a 'divine gift' and their recitation of bylinas only on 'holy days' is highly valuable. As is the account of the storytellers' almost religious conviction that 'cursed be he who dares to add or

omit anything from the content of the ancient tales'. Let us recall that the leading role in the rites of 'holy days' belonged to the 'eldest clans'.

Kozhinov concludes that the 10th–11th centuries were not the beginning of the bylin epic, but the final stage in its formation. And whilst one might dispute his assertion that the struggle against the Jewish Khazar Khaganate was originally the main theme of the bylin, the mark left on the bylin by this struggle is undeniable. One need only consider the image of the monstrous 'hero Zhidovin', whom only Ilya Muromets is capable of subduing. As for the regrettable underestimation of the pre-Christian element in the bylina – as indeed in the life of medieval Rus' in general – one can only express regret. For Kozhinov, the early 11th century was not a time of 'struggle to establish Christianity', but a 'time of the evident flourishing of Christianity in Rus'. Not to mention the outlying regions, such as Murom—which, as we have noted, was only converted to Christianity in the 12th century by Prince Constantine, Equal to the Apostles—or the land of Galicia, where vast pagan temples stood until the Mongol era, or the land of the Vyatichi, where burial mounds were erected over funeral pyres until the same period, – yet in the second-largest and most important city of Rus', O Lord, Veliky Novgorod, at the end of that same 11th century, a sorcerer appeared, calling on the people to rise up against the bishop and bewildering them with miracles – 'and all believed in him'. Only the newcomer, the Prince of Chernigov from the Olgovich clan of the Polovtsians, with his steppe retinue, marched under the cross raised by the bishop, 'whilst all the people followed the sorcerer'. And had it not been for the treachery of the prince, who had become intoxicated by the spirit of the steppe and had the sorcerer slain during negotiations, Novgorod might well have suffered the same fate as Murom.

Here one cannot help but agree with the words of the great Russian scholar and patriot Igor Yakovlevich Froyanov: 'If one were to ask what, to a greater extent, shaped the worldview of Old Russian society – paganism or Christianity – then one could, without fear of exaggeration, say: paganism.' Is it possible to seriously discuss
'the history of Rus' and 'the Russian word' whilst overlooking the worldview that defined the pre-Mongol era?

Finally, we should note the references to the bylina made by another Russian scholar and patriot, Apollon Grigoryevich Kuzmin, who passed away recently. He was the first since A.N. Veselovsky to publish the 'Russian' excerpts from the *Tidrek Saga*. In his articles, he

He drew attention to the epic accounts of Ilya Muromets's stay in the Talyan region and proposed an interpretation of the original form of the hero's epithet – Muravlenin, Morovlin, Murovets – as 'Morav', meaning 'a resident of Moravia'. However, these valuable observations did not gain traction, and the parallels between the bylinas and the saga were traditionally explained as the 'influence of the Russian epic of the time of Saint Vladimir'.

Chapter 5
General conclusions of the competing schools. On the threshold of synthesis?

The year 1997 was marked by the publication of two works by two schools of Soviet bylina studies. Brought together under a single cover, articles by I.Ya. Froyanov and Yu.I. Yudin, written in different years, appeared in the collection
The History of the Bylinas. In the same year, the anthology *Slavic Traditional Culture and the Modern World* featured an article by S.N. Azbelev, a student of B.A. Rybakov, entitled ‘Traditions about the Earliest Princes of Rus’ based on records from the 11th–20th centuries’. One can only marvel at how this coincidence escaped the attention of the academic world!

The joint work of the professional folklorist Yudin and the historian Froyanov yielded impressive and, on the whole, undoubtedly accurate results. The researchers have uncovered a powerful pre-state layer in Russian bylinas, including those about Churila Plenkovich or Duke Stepanovich, which were regarded as little more than popular satire from the era of the Muscovite Tsardom. They have convincingly demonstrated the ritual nature of the inactivity and immobility of the epic Vladimir, as if chained to Kyiv and his terem, by comparing it with the ritual immobility of the ‘sacred kings’ of archaic societies described in George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. This in itself compels us to look back into the twilight of the pre-chronicle era – for the earliest princes of the Russian chronicles personally led distant campaigns, as attested by foreign chroniclers as well (Leo the Deacon on Igor and Svyatoslav). The theme of marriage in the bylina also points to pre-chronicle antiquity. Froyanov and Yudin note that the bylinic
‘heroes (Potyk, Gleb Volodyevich, Ivan Godinovich. – *L. P.*) continue to uphold the traditional right’ to exogamous, inter-clan marriage, ‘whilst in real life, *tribal* (my emphasis. – *L. P.*) endogamy is becoming established’. To assess the chronological significance of this aspect of the bylinas’ plots, one must bear in mind that the chronicles reflect both the earliest stage of Slavic unification,
‘tribal confederations’, which it refers to as ‘lands’ (‘the Drevlyan land sent us to you’) or ‘principalities’. The fact that

these alliances came into being is indicated by the fact that the chronicles have preserved not a single clear mention of the tribes that constituted them. There is certainly no question of ‘clans’ either. Bylin society turns out to be an entire epoch older than that of the chronicles!

This and much else prompts researchers to push the dating of the historical foundations of the bylinas further back in time. ‘Its (the bylin epic – *L. P.*) origins must be traced back to approximately the middle of the first millennium AD.’

This conclusion would most likely have been stated unequivocally in the joint monograph planned by the authors, but its completion was prevented by the death of Y. I. Yudin.

It should be noted that not everything in the collection is entirely accurate. The interpretation of the bylina about Volga and Mikula appears to be a clear failure, compounded by its repeated mention. Attempts to portray the epic heroes as the embodiment of the ‘armed people’ of the era of military democracy can only provoke bewilderment – is it conceivable that the ‘armed people’ would abandon the capital to the mercy of fate in the face of an invasion, simply because ‘we have nothing to do with Prince Vladimir’? That a representative of the ‘armed people’ should serve, like the bogatyr Dunay, ‘under seven kings, in seven hordes’? Finally, the attempt to extend the process of the epic’s formation to the 14th century is very poorly substantiated. The unconvincing nature of such attempts was already demonstrated by M.M. Plisetsky.

But let us return, dear reader, to the claim regarding the origins of the epic ‘in the middle of the first millennium AD’. It is telling that in the very same year an article was published by one of the long-standing, irreconcilable opponents of the St Petersburg co-authors – S.N. Azbelev – in which the author, by entirely different means, of course, reached the same conclusion.

Having analysed the figure of Vladimir in the bylina, Azbelev concluded that he was too archaic and that ‘it is difficult to accept that Saint Vladimir was the first prototype’ of the bylin-prince. Here, Azbelev echoes Tsapenko’s line of reasoning, but does not stop there; he goes further. He points out that the original and predominant form of the prince’s patronymic in the bylina is ‘Vseslavich’. I would add that ‘Svyatoslavich’ appeared in the epic as late as the 20th century, and was almost certainly influenced by literary sources

or the influence of collectors who ‘explained’ to the uneducated Pomor storytellers exactly who they were singing about.

Here, Azbelev draws on material from the Tidrek Saga and the Ioakim Chronicle. The resemblance between the bylinic Ilya and Ilya the Russian from the saga is so obvious, whilst the lack of resemblance between ‘Valdemar, King of the Rus’ from the saga and Vladimir the Saint is equally evident. In the Ioakim Chronicle, Vladimir is the name given to one of the legendary ancient princes. It is curious that Vladimir is preceded in this chronicle by figures who are clearly drawn from the mythical epic: eponymous heroes and progenitors such as Sloven, Rus, Vandal, Volkh and others. And after him comes a succession of twelve nameless generations right up to the almost historical Burivoy, father of the famous and now unquestionably historical Gostomysl.

‘The clear correspondence between certain significant episodes and, at the same time, heroes in… the bylinas, in the folkloric sources of the Ioakim Chronicle and in the medieval adaptations of the Germanic epic, cannot be explained as a mere coincidence,’ asserts the researcher.

So, to what period does Sergei Nikolayevich date the lives of the prototypes of the heroes of the bylin epic? If the bylin’s Vladimir is identical to ‘Valdemar’ of the Tidrek Saga and to Vladimir of the Ioakim Chronicle, then this question is easy to answer. The former fought against the Goths and the Huns; the latter was an ancestor in the thirteenth generation of Gostomysl, who, according to Germanic chronicles, died in 844. It is not difficult to work out that he lived around the 5th century, precisely during the time of the Goths and the Huns.

That is to say, the very ‘middle of the first millennium AD’ which the St Petersburg co-authors regard as the time of the emergence of the bylas.

So, as you can see, dear reader, representatives of different schools have, using different methods, come to the conclusion that the bylinic epic took shape in the middle of the first millennium AD. It is now time for the ‘combination’ of the principles and methods of both schools of bylinology—as predicted by N.N. Trubitsyn—to bring an end to their fruitless rivalry, which has held back research into bylinas for no less than half a century, and to unite the efforts of their supporters. The book that you, the reader, are now holding in your hands is an attempt to ‘combine’ the methods developed by both schools.

Part Two
In Search of the Bylin Heroes – Deep into the Centuries

Chapter 1
From milestone to milestone. The problem of dating epic tales

Any researcher of bylinas who studies them not merely as literary works but in relation to Russian history faces the problem of dating. How can one determine when a bylina originated?

The names of the characters have been, and remain, the standard point of reference for the historical school. ‘The names of historical figures serve as primary dating indicators,’ advised B.A. Rybakov in his textbook
Russian Folk Poetry. However, as has been noted on numerous occasions, this basis is highly unreliable. And the issue here is not so much that the search for historical prototypes of a bylin’s name, as B.N. Putilov insists, must be carried out in strict accordance with the rules of linguistic science. This requirement smacks strongly of the philologist’s professional snobbery. And is it even possible to blindly apply precise linguistic rules to the study of living speech, particularly folklore, where words often change not according to the laws derived by linguists, but according to the interplay of meanings and assonances? This applies particularly to names. In accordance with which laws of linguistics, for example, did the ill-fated Polish prince Konrad of Mazovia, who summoned the crusading scourge of the Teutonic Order to the shores of the Baltic Sea, ‘turn into’… Kondrat in the Russian chronicles? Or how likely is it, from the perspective of rigorous philologists, that the name of the Emperor of France was transformed into ‘Neopalen’ and subsequently into ‘Opalen’ in nineteenth-century Russian folklore?

We have become so accustomed to repeating the phrase ‘linguistics is an exact science’ that very few of those who utter this magical phrase really stop to consider its meaning. Yet ‘exact’, when applied to science, does not imply a positive assessment (‘an accurate shot’, ‘an accurate account’).
‘Exact science’ means a science that is abstract, detached from the realities of the world ‘as given to us through our senses’. The exact sciences – geometry, algebra and the like – deal with, in Daly’s words, ‘speculative constructs’, and their methods must be applied to the study of the real world

must be done with the utmost caution. After all, no one assumes that two parallel streets will never intersect. However, an example of mathematical methods imposed on the humanities is plain for all to see – the regrettably famous 'theory' of Nosovsky and Fomenko, which attempts to 'add', 'divide' and 'reduce to a common denominator' people and events. I believe that the methods of the exact science of linguistics should be applied with equal caution in history and folklore studies – fields that explore the world of facts and the living word; a world in which, as Dostoevsky himself noted, two times two may sometimes equal not four, nor even five, but a stearin candle.

Otherwise… what might happen otherwise, we, the reader, can clearly see from the example of linguists' meddling in historical sources, such as the story of the 'Russian' names for the Dnieper rapids in Constantine Porphyrogenitus's writings, or the names of Russian ambassadors in 10th-century treaties with Byzantium. In the first instance, the dialectal Scandinavian word 'fors' is not only forced, contrary to its primary meaning – 'rapids, swift current' – to denote a river rapids; it also transforms, within the space of a single paragraph, into 'foros' (Varuforos), 'far' (Aifar) and even 'bors' (Ulbors). In the treaties, meanwhile, the very same sound combination 'lf' – again, within a single document – 'shifts' here to 'lav' ('Krolf' – Rolav) and there to 'leb' ('Ulf' – Uleb). From a linguistic point of view, each of these 'transitions' appears plausible, and it is not worth dwelling on the question of how they could all have occurred within the confines of a short text. Even less attention is paid to the question of *when* such changes could have taken place – for the laws by which linguists verify their authenticity are derived from the study of processes spanning many centuries – whereas both the names of the Varangian Rus' and the names of the rapids were recorded from the words of the language's native speakers themselves.

Historians ought to have grappled with these questions, but instead, opening their mouths like fledglings, they greedily swallow the 'interpretations' brought to them by caring linguists without chewing them over – after all, it is an 'exact science'.

Yet on one point the critics of the historical school are undoubtedly right – the names found in bylinas are an unreliable basis for the historian. They are far too variable and have too many variants. And it is by no means certain that the earliest record preserves the original form of a hero's name. Thus, in the very first

published collection of bylinas, *Ancient Russian Poems* by Kirshi Danilov, we find Saul Levanidovich and his son Konstantenushko Saulovich. The same heroes later appear in Kirievsky's work under the names Saur Vaniovich and his son Saur Saurovich. It is evident, however, that it was precisely Kirshi Danilov's source—or one of his predecessors and teachers—who, for the sake of phonetic similarity, adapted the obscure ancient names to familiar, Orthodox ones. In some versions of the bylin about the death of Churila Plenkovich, the boyar Bermyata becomes Ermila. The bogatyr with the thoroughly Christian name and patronymic, Samson Samoilovich—who led the Kyiv bogatyr retinue before the rise of Ilya Muravlenin—is called Samson Kolybaevich in other versions, whilst in some records the name Saxon Kolybaevich has survived, a name containing absolutely nothing Christian. Finally, the title hero of the bylin 'Khoten Bludovich' is transformed now into Fadey, now into Fotey, now into Gordenko, and even into Kotenko Bludovich. What scope this offers for interpretations and connections using Rybakov's method!

Researchers of Western epics do not face such problems. Firstly, Catholicism did not at all require people to change their names to Greek, Latin or ancient Hebrew ones, as Orthodoxy did. In the West, people were even canonised not only with biblical names (Thomas Aquinas), but also with folk names (Saint Hildegard), and even with nicknames – Saint Francis of Assisi was known by a different name, 'Francesco', 'little Frenchman' – a nickname the sharp-tongued Italians gave the lad for his slender grace and dreamy nature. Secondly, the West was unfamiliar with reforms such as those of Peter the Great, when non-calendar, folk names were transformed into 'nicknames' and banished from official use. Consequently, whilst for the British, Germans and French of the Modern Era, names such as Arthur, Siegfried or Roland sounded entirely familiar and native, to Russian storytellers of the 18th and 19th centuries, names like Khoten, Saur or Bermyata no longer seemed Russian. Hence the need to 'rework' them into something familiar and recognisable. Usually, the changes were based on phonetic similarity.

Yet the very same bylin about Khoten refutes the view of bylinas as a literary phenomenon, the product of someone's 'creativity'. For in that case, this 'eloquent' name—worthy of Barkov's mischievous pen—

patronymic of the main character would certainly have been played upon by the author. But no – the bogatyr is portrayed as a man of honour, defending the honour of his insulted mother, and in no way 'living up' to his name. And this can only point to one thing – even in such a seemingly minor episode, in the description of the feud between two Kyiv court families, the storytellers did not follow their own imagination, but rather tradition, the basis of which most likely once lay in fact.

Putilov, however, once again goes to extremes, claiming that in the epic only the names are historical, having been, as it were, 'embedded' by the storytellers into some more ancient plots. Even a cursory acquaintance with Western epics leaves no stone unturned in refuting such an approach – for, to take one example, in *The Song of Roland*, it is not only the names of Emperor Charlemagne and his paladins – Roland, Olivier – but also the central event: the death of Roland and his retinue in the Pyrenees whilst battling the Saracens. In *The Song of the Nibelungs* and the *Volsung Saga* reflect not only the names of real figures – the Hun leader Attila (Etzel, Atli), his wife Ildiko (Krimhild, Gudrun), and her brother, the King of the Burgundians, Gundikari (Hunter, Gunnar) – Their connections are also historically accurate, as is the fact that Attila wiped out the Burgundian royal house. King Arthur did indeed exist and fought against the Saxons at the Battle of Badon. So, however unreliable epic names may be, it is still not appropriate for a historian to ignore them entirely.

It is tempting to regard the amount of so-called 'epic fantasy' as a means of determining the age of a bylin. There is just one snag: what exactly should be considered this 'fantasy'? In the bylinas about Sadko or about Dobrynya and Marinka Kaidalovna, the Sea King and the witch Marinka—with her lover, the Serpent—who transforms the hero into 'Tura the Golden-Horned' are, of course, fantastical figures to us. However, not only in Ancient Rus', but even in the Russian North at the time when the bylinas were being collected, all this was by no means fantasy, but the very ordinary reality of everyday life. I, the reader, have already recounted how healers would invoke the Sea King and how they would sacrifice horses to him. Well, if only it were just horses – on the Kola Peninsula, there was an incident where two Pomors, fish merchants, took to

'feed' the mistress of the Kitska River, 'Kitska the Lady', with regular… human sacrifices! And not for salvation in a storm, as in the epic

about Sadko, but for the sake of consistently bountiful catches, which, according to popular belief, were supplied to the brothers by this very powerful figure.

For the storytellers, the Pomors and the Siberians, it was the hero's non-Orthodox name, the mysterious city of Novgorod itself, and the gusli that seemed far more like the stuff of fairy tales and fantasy.

The same applies to the epic about Marinka Kaidalovna and Dobrynya Nikitich. The unfamiliar name of the bogatyr, roaming through the unknown city of Kyiv with bow and arrows, as if he were a Ostyak or a Samoyed; a prince ruling Rus' in place of the sovereign emperor – in short, everything that we today regard as historical and which, in the eyes of the storytellers and their listeners, lent a fairy-tale aura to the tale. At the same time, any one of them would surely have known more than one story about just such a 'heretic, an evil sorceress' from a neighbouring village, or even their own, the mistress of a fiery serpent, capable of transforming a good young man who had angered her into a mysterious and incomprehensible 'tur' – if not something even worse – right there and then. The folklore collector N.E. Onchukov once wrote: 'For a Pechora native, the miraculous in epic tales is by no means seen as anything out of the ordinary. His real life is full of such wonders; the world around him is full of miracles and inexplicable phenomena: water spirits dwell in rivers and especially in lakes; in the forest there are wood spirits; in one's own home, behind the stove, the house spirit reigns; and all around there are werewolves, witches, goblins and sorcerers who – if you anger them – will even now turn you into a chestnut-coloured aurochs."

Afterwards, one recalls with a smile Propp's attempts to squeeze the worldview of the narrators of epic tales into the Procrustean framework of 'historical materialism', declaring werewolfism in them a 'poetic device', and belief in the Sea Tsar as a lost one.

And finally, as for Maykov's method—the study of everyday life and social relations in the epic—thank goodness, not everything is as it seems. It is precisely the realities of everyday life, both private and public, that were often reinterpreted by the bards and 'enriched' with all manner of anachronisms. In Western epics, such as the *Song of the Nibelungs*, heroes of the Great Migration period speak of vassals and lords, bear titles such as 'master of the kitchen'—which did not exist until the Crusades—fight in tournaments for the honour of fair ladies and, like devout Catholics, attend church. In the bylina, this is even more noticeable – alongside features of everyday life in Kievan Rus' and even more ancient times, the influence of later eras is also clearly evident. Traces of the era

the Muscovite State (Cossacks, Duma clerks, tavern brawlers, streltsy), but the St Petersburg Empire also left its mark, both in the public sphere (senators, leaders, footmen) and, in particular, in everyday life (galoshes, spyglasses, prospectuses, suitcases and so on).

How, then, can one make sense of this motley mixture of layers from different eras whilst determining the 'age' of a bylin? This is where the method developed by V.V. Cherdyncev and R.S. Lipets comes in handy. 'It is difficult to imagine that archaic terms could have been artificially introduced into the bylina. Therefore, when early and late terms are encountered, preference… must be given to the earlier one'. 'The most ancient terms and concepts are crucial for chronological dating.' To illustrate: the epic arms the heroes of the Mycenaean era, the Bronze Age, to fight beneath the walls of Troy with iron weapons – but does not have them wielding stone axes. It clads King Arthur's Celtic warriors in the armour of knights from the height of the Middle Ages – but does not seat them in ancient chariots. And this is only natural – for whatever the storytellers incorporated into the sagas, legends and bylinas, they drew from the life around them.

Thus, the bylinas are no younger than the most ancient aspects of daily life and social organisation reflected within them. If, in the bylinas, the supreme ruler of Rus' is a prince rather than a tsar – then the bylinas cannot date from later than 1547, when Ivan Vasilyevich, Grand Prince of Moscow and All Rus', proclaimed himself tsar. Another sign, a landmark leading us back into the depths of time, is the free carrying of weapons in everyday situations by the heroes of the bylina. In the same bylina about Dobrynya and Marinka, the title character

> Sharpened his sharp sabre, Then
> Dobrynya went to matins.

Dobrynya is not alone amongst the characters of the bylina in his habit of attending prayer services whilst armed. In the bylin about the death of Churila, Bermyat, having suddenly returned home and found Churila with his wife, kills him with a sabre (or even a sword – recall our discussion of

the sabre – the epic substitute for the sword). What is more, even women leave the house armed, and this surprises no one.

> She dressed in a light-coloured gown, And
> took a damascene knife with her.

Meanwhile, no such tradition existed in Muscovy. Sir John Bowes, the ambassador of the English ‘Virgin Queen’ Elizabeth, was stopped whilst attempting to enter an audience with the Russian Tsar with a sword at his belt. He was ordered to hand over the sword, which outraged the hot-tempered English lord. There is a well-known lament by the ‘champions of ancient piety’ from the late 17th century, stating that
‘in Moscow they have begun to shave their beards and wear Polish caftans and sabres’. The leader of the Old Believers, the famous ‘fire-worshipping’ Archpriest Avvakum, indignant at the icons painted in the ‘Franz-style’, remarked that in them Christ
‘is depicted like a German; the only thing missing is that sabre at his hip’. In other words, for a Muscovite, carrying a weapon in an everyday, non-military setting was a clear sign of foreignness and alienation, much like unfamiliar clothing or hairstyles.

During the Moscow uprising of 1662, a huge crowd of Muscovites who had approached Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich’s palace in Kolomenskoye were literally cut to pieces by the punitive streltsy, because, as Grigory Kotoshikhin recounts this story, ‘none of them had anything in their hands’. Kotoshikhin writes for the Swedes, who need special explanations – in Muscovy itself, everything was clear to everyone as it was. Well, the prosperous capital had already managed to forget the Time of Troubles, but even in the troubled outlying regions it was the same – in July 1648, the rebels in Veliky Ustyug were armed with nothing more substantial than clubs known as ‘oslop’.

In an engraving by Albrecht Dürer, three German peasants are standing, having gathered, judging by the baskets in their hands, for the market. Yet one has an imposing cutlass hanging from his belt, whilst the man standing opposite him leans casually on a genuine sword. In Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s painting *Peasant Wedding*, the villagers—whether rushing about in a merry dance or seated at the banquet table—have broadswords, swords and daggers hanging from their belts. These are all peaceful scenes

of village life; yet when rebels appear in engravings, halberds and morgensterns loom menacingly above their heads alongside pitchforks and those very same axes, whilst the rebellious peasants themselves are clad in helmets, chainmail and cuirasses.

No wonder, then, that the Swedes must have been astonished, reading Grigory Kotoshikhin, at the remarkable Muscovites who, even whilst rebelling, would march against their sovereign with their bare hands.

I have no intention of discussing whose customs are better – those of Muscovy or those of Germany. One might speak of the despotism of the Muscovite tsars, who deprived their subjects of the means of self-defence, or one might speak of the civilisation of Muscovy, where a sword or at least a dagger was, by all accounts, a vital necessity for every man (an unflattering analogy emerges for Dürer and Bruegel's compatriots, with the cutting and stabbing 'details of national costume' of certain more barbaric peoples). I shall simply note that the ideals of modern
'civilised' society in this respect are, after all, closer to Moscow than to the Europe of that time, armed to the teeth.

What is more important to us is this: the heroes of the epic tales are, in this respect, not at all like the subjects of the Moscow sovereigns. They resemble Europeans – and the Rus' of the 10th century, about whom Arab travellers were compelled to mention their swords at every turn: 'they all carry swords at all times' (Ibn Rusta), 'each of them carries an axe, a knife and a sword' (Ibn Fadlan). The same Ibn Fadlan reports that Rus' women carry a knife on their chest – this brings to mind the heroine of a bylin who took a knife with her when she left the house.

Just like the title of prince, the carrying of weapons by bylinas' heroes outside, so to speak, combat situations, helps us in our definition
the 'age' of the bylina. The bylina predate the Grand Duchy of Moscow, and may even predate the Mongol period.

But are they older than Christianity? Bylinas are filled with 'cathedrals', 'Gospels' and 'crosses on the gate' – can these serve to determine the 'age' of bylinas' plots and the epic as a whole? Do Christian features constitute something inherently present in the bylina, evidence of the time of their origin – or are they a later superimposition, testifying only to the fact that the bylin epic has existed in a Christian country for centuries?

Chapter 2
Crosses and Amulets. Christianity in the Bylinas: Superimposition or Foundation?

Recently, there has been a renewed surge in publications seeking to prove that Orthodox Christianity forms the spiritual, moral and worldview foundation of Russian bylina. One cannot fail to respect, for instance, the late Metropolitan John of St Petersburg and Ladoga's desire to serve his faith in this way; however, it is entirely legitimate to ask: were the means employed to achieve such a noble goal appropriate? Did the venerable priest not fall into excessive polemical exaggeration when speaking of the Orthodox foundations of the bylinas? It would be unfair to dispute the obvious fruits of the author's enthusiasm in *The Russian Symphony*, such as the assertion regarding the 'monastic ministry' of the bylinas' heroes. It is all too obvious that it is untenable to classify as monks—or even to suggest they were in any way akin to them—the family man Dobrynya (who, incidentally, was in his second marriage), the 'womaniser' Alyosha Popovich, and Ilya Muromets, who fathered a daughter and a son out of wedlock (though, incidentally, his wife is mentioned in other bylinas). Nor is there any need to mention that the bogatyrs by no means shunned merry feasts, which bore no resemblance whatsoever to the austere, formal monastic meals, and constantly broke the sixth commandment of Moses (in case any of the readers have forgotten, the sixth commandment in the Bible is 'Thou shalt not kill').

Sometimes one has to listen to things that are no less strange from secular people, such as so-called professional scholars. Take Vadim Kozhinov, for example: 'In the post-revolutionary period, the notion was vigorously promoted that Russian bylinas are an expression of a purely pagan way of life and consciousness'. 'For heaven's sake,' one feels like exclaiming here, 'who, where and when did such a notion
'imposed' such a notion?" V.Y. Propp believed that 'the epic is directed against mythology as a worldview' – in other words, against paganism. As we recall, he reduced all manifestations of pagan belief in werewolves and the Lords of the Elements to 'literary devices', and regarded the bylin about Dobrynya

and the Serpent as a symbol of victory over paganism. His main opponent in the study of bylinas, B.A. Rybakov, attributed the historical background of most bylinas to the already Christian era – the late 10th to 12th centuries – and does not seem to have given any thought at all to the religious underpinnings of the Russian epic in general. All the more so because, from this scholar's point of view, the difference between Christianity and paganism was, as is well known, not a fundamental one. Meanwhile, the spokesmen for so-called 'scientific atheism', such as Mikhail Iosifovich Shakhnovich, declared that 'the Russian epic reflected the idea *of* the people's *liberation* from ancient paganism' – no more and no less!

On the other hand, we can easily find the 'view that Russian bylinas are an expression of a purely pagan existence and consciousness' among researchers who lived and worked long before the revolution. Here is what A.A. Kotlyarevsky wrote: before Christianity, 'there was another, more vital foundation for our heroic tales'. 'The tales of the Russian bogatyrs did not arise suddenly, nor did they originate in the era of Saint Vladimir: they were the fruit of the people's entire previous existence.' 'Paganism still shines brightly in the character of the bogatyrs, and even Vladimir himself appears in the popular imagination as a pure pagan.'

His like-minded colleague in the school of mythology, F.I. Buslaev, asserted that the bylinic epic makes no mention of baptism, and that Vladimir 'is even portrayed more as a pagan'. 'In the epic figure of Ilya Muromets, there are many of the great virtues of an ideal hero, but they are all explained in terms of general moral principles. The people do not extol any specifically Christian virtues in this hero'. Statements such as 'to stand up for the Orthodox faith… for the sake of churches and monasteries', when uttered by the bogatyrs and especially by Ilya, are described by Buslaev as 'tirades of the most recent invention', which 'contradict his (Ilya's – *L. P.*) actions, which, from a Christian perspective, must appear to be sacrilege'.

Such views were held not only by supporters of the mythological school; their main opponent, the head of the historical school, Vsevolod Miller, considered the image of Vladimir in the bylina to be purely pagan.

This creates a very intriguing situation – the fact that modern champions of Orthodoxy are attempting to attribute to the Soviet 'militant

atheists' turns out to be the viewpoint of Orthodox scholars from the Orthodox Russian Empire.

However, such enthusiasms and missteps on the part of Orthodox authors should not obscure the important question they raise regarding the place and role of the Christian element in the bylinas. For it is indeed present, and this cannot be denied – pectoral crosses and icons, churches and monasteries, priests and monks. There is talk of the 'Orthodox faith', 'holy commandments' and similar concepts. Admittedly, considerable caution is required here. After seventy years of an atheist regime, modern researchers – even if they have hastily learnt which hand to use when making the sign of the cross, even if they have hung an aluminium cross round their necks – often have the most bizarre and vague notion of religion. They are quite capable of mistaking
'typically Christian' or 'typically pagan' traits that are common to any religious consciousness. What could be simpler than to discern a Christian influence in the 'heavenly voice' that often resounds in the epics about Dobrynya Nikitich? It is curious, incidentally, why this particular hero was favoured by an unknown heavenly benefactor, who would sometimes encourage him in battle against the Serpent and explain how not to drown in the blood of the vanquished monster, and at other times inform the travelling Dobrynya that, back in his native Kyiv, his wife was about to marry Alyosha Popovich any day now. However, exactly the same voices are heard in times of trouble above the heads of the heroes of the Indian epic – and there, it is difficult to suspect any Christian influence. In the Bible, on the other hand, it appears only rarely, and even more rarely in the lives of the saints.

In any case, the researcher of bylinas is faced with the question: is the Christian element of the bylinas their very foundation, the original basis of the Russian epic, or merely a later overlay? In other words, who is correct in their assessment of the religious underpinnings of our bogatyr legends – the Orthodox publicists of modern Russia or the Orthodox scholars of the Russian Empire?

To begin with, we must determine whether the very framing of the question is valid: is it possible that legends of pagan origin were absorbed and assimilated by the Christian consciousness of the Middle Ages?

Such examples can be found immediately in Western Europe. First and foremost is the British cycle of legends about King Arthur, in

which the semi-legendary king is portrayed as the ideal Catholic sovereign, and his knights as good Christians. Meanwhile, it is worth turning to the lives of the British saints, contemporaries of the 'king of the past and the future' — Hilda, Cadoc, Carantoc and Padarn — as the image of a pious ruler who bore 'the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ upon his shoulders' in battle, who constantly heeded the Bishop of Canterbury and who sent out knights in search of the chalice containing the blood of Christ, vanishes like smoke. In his place stands a completely different Arthur (one cannot help but recall that this name means 'Bear'). In the hagiographies, the king is portrayed as a pagan, a sworn enemy of the Church, and a destroyer of monasteries.

No less striking are the changes that have taken place in the epics of the Germanic and Scandinavian peoples. The Scandinavian *Volsunga Saga* and the Germanic *Nibelungenlied* describe the very same events and the very same heroes. However, in the Christian 'Song of the Nibelungs', the pagan Aesir gods—who played such a vital role in the action of the Norse saga—somehow 'miraculously' vanish, the Valkyrie Brunhild is transformed into the entirely earthly, mortal queen and warrior Brungild, whilst churches, chaplains and Masses—which were absent from the saga—make their appearance. The famous quarrel between the queens, which in the *Song* erupted at the church doors, takes place in the *Saga* whilst they are bathing together (ritually?). Here, Siegfried's wife does not attempt to enter the church before the wife whom the same hero had won for his sovereign, but simply washes upstream from her.

In other words, we have answered the question: could a pagan epic have been 'Christianised'? It could have been; such things did happen. But many things could have been possible – yet did not come to pass. Is there evidence, examples, that in the bylina tradition, Christianity was superimposed upon paganism, supplanting and replacing it?

Such examples do exist.

One of the favourite episodes in the bylin epic, as portrayed by Christian authors, is the attempt on Ilya Muravlenin's life by his son, the Falconer. Let us recall: failing to recognise his own son in the brazen 'boaster' attempting to break through from the steppe into Rus', bypassing the outpost, Ilya defeats him, but then recognises him (usually by a ring or a cross, once left by his mother with instructions to give it to her son should he be born) and lets him go. Sokolnik, however, returns at night to

Ilya's tent, pitched in the field, and attempts to stab his sleeping father. However, the treacherous son's spear strikes the cross hanging on the hero's chest (usually fantastically heavy, a 'heroic' cross) and bounces off. Ilya, having woken, executes his treacherous offspring.

The scene, needless to say, is striking. However, a curious variant of this same epic was recorded on the Northern Dvina, in which the cross is absent:

> The spear struck Ilya in his white chest;
> Ilya had a talisman weighing one and a
> half poods…

This version was recorded in the first half of the nineteenth century. So one cannot blame it on the pernicious influence of Soviet antichrists, as is fashionable nowadays. One must also rule out the replacement of the cross with an amulet in the text of the bylin. Any such replacement could only have occurred in the opposite direction. Let us recall: 'when early and late terms are encountered, preference… must be given to the *earlier* term'. In a remote corner of the Russian North, the original, earliest version of the bylin has been preserved, whilst most storytellers have replaced the now-obscure 'amulett' with the familiar cross.

In fact, the cross itself may well have appeared in the bylina long before Christianity and without any connection to it. Among the Bulgarian Rusali (something akin to a troupe of Christmas mummers, organised along the lines of a guild or perhaps even a magical order), their costumes included metal crosses on the chest – and this despite the fact that during the Rusali festival, the Rusali were strictly forbidden to cross themselves or pray to the Christian God. Incidentally, the Rusalii's rituals also included sword dances. Many scholars see in these groups the remnants of secret male brotherhoods, from which the druzhina developed before the start of the Middle Ages.

Another transitional element, a rather striking one, has also survived. When the 'Tatar' army approaches Kyiv, Vladimir, in a panic, is about to flee, but Princess Apraksa advises him:

> 'Go, then, to God's church,
> And pray to our mighty *Gods*.

It is equally clear that the original reference here is to the mighty gods. The church appeared in this epic later.

But the transition from pagan values and symbols to Orthodox ones is most vividly and fascinatingly traced in the bylin ‘Vasily Buslaev Went to Pray’.

The most complete and, in our view, the latest versions of this bylina recount how the leader of the Novgorod daredevils sets off on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Jerusalem. In doing so, Vasily utters the famous words: ‘Beaten and battered much in my youth, in my old age I must save my soul’. Although, strictly speaking, you couldn’t really call him an old man at all – he’s a bachelor, the leader of a gang of similarly unmarried ‘wild, reckless lads’. And the way he saves his soul… hmm… is rather odd. But all in good time, reader. In most versions, Vasily sails to Jerusalem from Novgorod on a ship, and his journey is not described. Less commonly, there is a rather vague description in which Vasily, following a route familiar to Russian merchants since time immemorial, travels down the Volga to the ‘Caspian’ Sea, and from there, again in some inexplicable way, ends up in Jerusalem. All that remains here is to agree with Propp: this bylina was composed and sung outside the pilgrimage tradition, where the routes to Jerusalem were, of course, well known. Moreover, I might add, this version emerged rather late – otherwise the Caspian Sea would have been referred to there, as in other bylinas, by its ancient name – ‘Khvalynskoye’.

But the third version is far more fascinating, in which the hero travels down the Volkhov, to Ladoga and across the Neva to the ‘Viranskoye’ or ‘Veryazhskoye’ (Baltic) Sea. In some versions featuring this route, there is no mention whatsoever of Jerusalem – the fateful encounter with the ‘white-burning stone’ bearing a prohibitive inscription and the eerie dead head takes place on an island in the middle of the ‘Veryazh Sea’.

But there really was an island in the Baltic Sea, one whose significance was entirely comparable to that of Jerusalem for the Christian world! This is modern-day Rügen, the ‘Island of the Rus’ of 10th-century Arab authors, and Buyan of Russian fairy tales and incantations. It has no shortage of white cliffs, and the pagan cult of the Baltic Slavs, centred on Arkona, involved the preservation of severed heads—whether sacrificed to the gods or those killed

in battle (‘dead head, human bone’ says to Vasily Buslaev: ‘I was no less a hero than you’). In fact, the separate storage of victims’ skulls is characteristic of all Slavic paganism, and of West Slavic paganism in particular (a subject which will be discussed in more detail later). Perhaps this reflects Celtic influence, which is so palpable amongst the Slavs in general and the Baltic Slavs in particular (some researchers believe that the very word ‘volkhv’ derives from the Slavic name for the Celts – ‘Volochi’). Or perhaps the roots of this eerie custom lie deeper – in the ancient European culture of the ‘megalith builders’, who erected structures from roughly hewn stone blocks (the most famous being Stonehenge in Britain), it was customary to keep skulls within these sacred structures. This is how the ‘white-burning stone’ and the skull from the epic tale are linked.

As early as the end of the 11th century, pilgrims had been travelling to Rügen from Christian Bohemia for prophecies for three centuries. It is entirely plausible that brave men from Novgorod sailed to Rügen, and such a voyage was quite comparable to Christians’ pilgrimage to Jerusalem; indeed, in the epic, it evidently replaced that pilgrimage once the ancient religion had finally become a thing of the past, Arkona had been destroyed, and Rügen had become German. This is all the more likely given that the origin of the Novgorodians from the southern shore of the Baltic Sea, from the coastal regions neighbouring Rügen, has been proven – as the chronicle states, ‘the people of Novgorod are of the Vaoyazhsk lineage’. This is indicated by the distinctive features of the Novgorod dialect – features that have survived to this day in the spoken language of the Pomors themselves and are reflected in the famous Novgorod birch-bark letters. It is also indicated by the West Slavic pottery found in the oldest layers of Novgorod and Pskov, the West Slavic construction of Novgorod’s fortifications—which has no parallels in southern Rus’—West Slavic bread ovens, arrowheads and many other pieces of archaeological evidence. Finally, the migration is indicated by the skulls of the ancient inhabitants of Novgorod, Ladoga and Pskov found in 11th–13th-century graves, which are very similar to those of the Baltic Slavs, the Obodrites. Christianity spread very slowly throughout the Novgorod lands – as we recall, at the end of

the 11th century, the rebellious Lord of Veliky Novgorod, with a rare, almost unprecedented unanimity, rose up against the bishop in favour of a pagan priest, a ‘volkhv’. In 1166, the Archbishop of Novgorod, Ilya, told his priests that ‘our land has only recently been baptised’, and recalled,

as an eyewitness, of ‘the first priests’. Around the same time, the ‘Word to the Ignorant on Fasting’ mentions, amongst other non-Christian peoples, the Vyatichi and the Slovenes of Novgorod, alongside the Bulgars and the Polovtsians. Thus, the authority of the ancestral shrines – those of the Baltic Slavs, the Varangians – must have endured for a very, very long time in these semi-pagan regions. Finally, Rügen was simply closer to Novgorod than Jerusalem or even Constantinople, whilst Novgorod was closer to Rügen than Bohemia, from where the pilgrims travelled there.

Thus, it can be confidently surmised that in the original version of the bylin, Vasily Buslaev ‘went to pray’ not to Christian Jerusalem, but to its pagan counterpart – the Varangian Arkona on Rügen. And much later, when the centre of the ancient faith had perished, and the faith itself—even in Novgorod—if it had not disappeared entirely, had merged with ‘popular Orthodoxy’ and ceased to be recognised as anything distinct from it, the storytellers ‘sent’ the Novgorod daredevil to Palestine; moreover, in the 19th century this process was not yet complete, so that, by examining various versions of the epic, one can trace how pagan elements were gradually replaced by Christian ones.

However, even in this Christianised version of the bylina, ‘compels’ Buslaev, whilst in Jerusalem, to blaspheme against a Christian shrine by bathing naked in the River Jordan. He commits a similar act of blasphemy in Novgorod, raising his hand without the slightest hesitation against his godbrother and even his godfather, a monk, accompanying the deadly blow of his club with the mocking words ‘Here’s a little egg for you – Christ is risen!’ and smashing the bell of St Sophia’s Cathedral – Novgorod’s principal Christian shrine.

Perhaps it is precisely in the light of Buslaev’s opposition to Christianity that we should consider the enigmatic episode found in some versions of this epic. The incident takes place during Buslaev’s battle, at the head of his retinue, against the ‘men of Novgorod’. The captured members of his retinue

> Their white hands are bound,
> Their nimble legs were fettered,
> And they are driven into the Pochai River.

Since Vasily's retinue are already captives, their pitiful plight is not merely an episode of the battle. Nor is it an execution: in Novgorod, convicted criminals, following a verdict by the veche, were sometimes thrown from a bridge into the river, but were never driven into it.

Propp points out that many of Buslaev's companions hailed from the remote outskirts of the Novgorod region: Kostya from Novy Torg and Torzhok, and Vasya from Beloye Ozero. Meanwhile, in these parts, as late as the early 20th century, villagers could force the priest to burn incense… before stone idols (such an incident did indeed occur before the First World War). Half a millennium earlier, local residents had driven 'holy' hermits from their cells, whilst monks founding monasteries in these wilds were forced to operate using methods verging on guerrilla tactics, at the risk of their lives. And Archbishop Makarii of Novgorod wrote in 1534 to the future Tsar Ivan the Terrible—then Grand Prince of Moscow—that 'in Chudi, and in Izhera, and in Korela, *and in many Russian places*, places of idolatrous worship persisted right up to the reign of Grand Prince Vasilii Ivanovich'. Vasily Ivanovich, the father of Ivan the Terrible, reigned from 1505 to 1533. It can therefore be assumed that this refers to the forced baptism of Vasily's retinue.

It is highly telling that Buslaev's blasphemies go unpunished as long as he mocks Christian holy objects. Retribution overtakes him only when he comes into conflict with the sacred objects of the Ancient Faith – the 'head of a thing' and the 'white-burning stone'. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile the content of this bylin with the view that the Russian epic is founded on Christian principles.

On the other hand, it fits perfectly with the sentiments of so-called 'folk Orthodoxy', from the very moment of its emergence in the 11th century right up to the 20th century. The 'Tale of Bygone Years' recounts how, in 1092, invisible 'demons' who were killing the people of Polotsk were unable to kill them inside their homes, which were protected by pagan amulets and a 'garrison' of household deities. And in the same work, from around the same period, it is recounted how a certain righteous monk beheld a demon 'in the guise of a Pole', *wandering about the monastery church during the service*, apparently not in the least bothered by the crosses and icons surrounding him, nor by the consecrated earth beneath his feet, nor by the incense wafting through the air, nor by the prayers and invocations of God's name resounding all around. Does this mean that pagan protection against demons is stronger than Christian protection?! And

after all, this is not found in the tale of some semi-literate peasant, but in a monastic chronicle, the authorship of which is attributed not to just anyone, but to the holy Venerable Nestor. So what was left for ordinary parishioners? A man as averse to paganism as Deacon Andrei Kuraev writes that in Russian fairy tales, when choosing between magic and divination on the one hand and prayer on the other, the heroes 'prefer to turn to magic. Prayer… is considered insufficient protection. For example, in churches (! – *L. P.*) people protect themselves from risen dead sorcerers by drawing a circle, using nails and a hammer, or a frying pan, rather than simply turning to the Lord'. Similarly, in Gogol's *Viy*, Khoma Brut defends himself against the raging – in the church! — not so much by prayer and the sign of the cross as by a pagan protective circle. Finally, among Russian peasants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ethnographers discovered a deep-seated belief that, if *the cross and prayer fail to help* against a pestering or attacking evil spirit, one must… swear! In the eyes of these Orthodox peasants, swearing (which originated from the pagan incantations of the fertility cult) proved to be *more powerful than the sign of the cross*.

One gets the impression that Russian people who considered themselves Orthodox sincerely believed that rituals and symbols of pagan origin were more powerful than Christian ones[3] . And where Orthodox peasants lived alongside unbaptised non-Russians, there circulated a host of folk tales expressing the conviction that their divination was more powerful than prayer services, and that the shaman was more powerful than the priest. In the Glazov and Sarapul districts, Russian peasants would buy livestock during droughts for Udmurt sacrifices, believing that 'Votsk divination' was more effective than processions and prayers.

Whenever the Russian faith clashes with a foreign one in these epics, themes alien to Christianity come to the fore. For example, ablution features in the bylinas as an indispensable condition of prayer and an integral part thereof. Before his battle with Tugarin, having set up camp by the Safat River, Alyosha

> Rises very, very early, Washes
> himself in the morning dawn,
> wipes himself with a white handkerchief,
> and prays to God, facing east.

Similarly, Ilya accompanies his morning prayer with ablution and also prays towards the east. In Christianity, such prayers were condemned and banned as far back as the 5th century by Leo the Great – on the grounds that one could not tell whether they were praying to Christ or to the Sun.

Since Alyosha's prayer is extremely simple and specific –
'O God, send us a shower and a steady rain' – it is tempting to see the very ritual of prayer and ablution as a magical act in itself. Alyosha, they say, cast a spell with the water – and brought down rain upon the 'fiery wings' of Tugarin's horse, literally bringing the enemy sorcerer down from the heavens to earth. However, the connection between prayer and ablution in the epic is far more profound and by no means coincidental. We have already spoken of Ilya. But in the bylin 'Ivan Godinovich'—perhaps the only place in the entire bylin epic where the enemy not only threatens the Russian bogatyr but also reviles the Russian faith whilst praising his own—it goes like this:

> 'Our faith, after all, is very simple indeed;
> there's no need to wash your fair face; for
> we worship the Saviour, our God.'

As we can see, washing is an integral part—and a firmly established one at that—of the epic conception of faith. There is no mention of any other requirements, rituals or prohibitions of the Russian faith—such as fasting—it is as if the whole of it consists of washing. 'Bathing and ablution bestow strength and special abilities upon heroes,' conclude Y.I. Yudin and I.Ya. Froyanov in their review of epic examples where the hero endeavours to wash himself before an important undertaking. It is evident that both this rite itself and the conception of Christianity it expresses have, shall we say, a very indirect connection. However, they are present in the rituals of Indo-European peoples. For instance, a Zoroastrian must wash the dust from their face, hands and feet before prayer – it is evidently from the Zoroastrian religion that Muslims borrowed this ritual, along with the five daily prayers themselves. The Hindu prayer, the 'puja', begins with a mandatory ablution, in accordance with the strict provisions of the Laws of Manu; the author himself has had the opportunity to take part in such rites. The warriors of

of the pagan Bulgarian prince Krum. In orthodox Byzantine Orthodoxy, of course, there is no ritual of ablution. However, it does exist among the Old Believers, for whom, as scholars write, ‘a noticeable revival of paganism is characteristic in their worldview and religious practices’.
‘Before engaging in any conversation, upon entering the house,’ wrote a Russian ethnographer in the century before last, ‘an Old Believer removes his hat and washes his hands; a prayer offered with hands that are not entirely clean is, in their view, not pure.’ The bylina, which reduces the Russian faith to the act of washing one’s hands—or, at any rate, begins it with such an act—has preserved the ancient Aryan, pagan approach to matters of faith.

Here is another curious fragment from a bylina. In one account of the bylina about how Dunay and Dobrynya secured a bride for Vladimir Vseslavich, her father replies to the heroic matchmakers:

> ‘I will not give Opraksia to you for your filthy faith,
> for your filthy faith and for your heat-worship.’

What is surprising is that the epic suddenly refers to the Russian faith as ‘pagan’. Usually, storytellers naively have people of other faiths refer to themselves and their faith as ‘pagan’. It is not only our epic that is characterised by this – in *The Song of Roland*, the Saracen caliph calls his subjects ‘a cursed race’ and swears by Jupiter and Apollo. In the Armenian epic *David of Sasun*, the Arabs ‘confess’ to idolatry, whilst in the Azerbaijani epic *The Book of Our Father Korkut*, it is the Christians who do so (‘I have forty-two shrines for my idols’).

But even more intriguing is the description of the Russian faith as a ‘cauldron’. Cauldrons played an important role in the rituals of many of Rus’ and the Slavs’ neighbours. Herodotus mentions in his ‘History’ the enormous sacred cauldron of the Scythians, forged by King Ariant from the copper tips of Scythian arrows (one from each warrior). Cauldrons are mentioned in descriptions of the sanctuaries of the legendary Biarmia in the Scandinavian sagas (the archaeologist and historian A.L. Nikitin has demonstrated quite convincingly that this country was situated not in Perm nor on the shores of the White Sea, but on the Western Dvina). Finally, all manner of cauldrons played a huge role in Celtic mythology – that is where the true ‘cauldron

faith' truly lay! It was precisely these magical cauldrons that Celtic heroes most often obtained from the Otherworld. Dagda's cauldron, from which no one ever left without being sated, and Cormac's cauldron, from which anyone could take whatever food they desired; the cauldron of Annun, lord of the underworld, which did not cook food for cowards; the cauldron of Cerdwén, in which the goddess brewed the drink of wisdom; and, finally, the cauldron of rebirth, retrieved from one of Ireland's lakes and restoring life to the dead.

In Russian folklore, the cauldron is most often a symbol of rebirth. In the fairy tales used by Ershov when creating
The Little Humpbacked Horse, the kind-hearted young man is transformed, upon diving into a boiling cauldron, into an irresistible handsome man, whilst the wicked and foolish tsar meets only his doom within it. In the legend 'The Greedy Priest', the main character, together with Saint Nicholas – who in the popular imagination has replaced Veles, the god of the underworld, death, but also healing and abundance – heals the princess by cutting her into pieces and washing these pieces in a cauldron. The same theme is echoed in the incantatory song about 'the death of the cow' – on a steep mountain, bonfires blaze; above the bonfires, cauldrons boil, into which certain 'old elders', singing 'of life, of death, of the whole human race', throw animals that have been dismembered and chopped up – 'all living creatures under heaven'; yet their aim is the same as that of the fairy-tale princesses or
'Mykola'-Veles from legend.

The old elders promise
Long lives to the whole world,
As if to that very evil Death
The old sages cast
Upon that great curse!

Sliced, hacked to pieces, and boiled in cauldrons whilst songs are sung, the 'creature' is meant to become invulnerable to death. But sometimes the cauldron also symbolises Death itself, as in the riddle:

There stands a pole,
Flowers on the post,
A cauldron beneath
the flowers, An
eagle above the
flowers,

It plucks the
flowers, Throws
them into the
cauldron,
Yet the flowers do not diminish
Nor does it end up in the cauldron.

In ancient Russian burial mounds – such as Chernaya Mogila near Chernihiv and Gnezdovo near Smolensk – a cauldron containing the bones and head of a ram – evidently a sacrificial animal, eaten at the funeral feast – was placed on the funeral pyres. And in the dwellings of certain sects and communities of Old Believers, there stood vats filled with water in the 'red corner' – the owners actually prayed to God before these cauldrons – in the most literal sense of the word.

From all these examples, we may conclude that the Christian element in the Russian epic tradition is not indigenous. It is a relatively late superimposition, and not one of values – these remained the same, pagan – but merely of words and names. On this matter, F.I. Buslaev and A.A. Kotlyarevsky are correct, not V.V. Kozhinov and Bishop John. Through the bylinas, one can trace how this overlay was formed, and how pagan concepts were replaced by Christian ones. There is also more compelling evidence of the epic tales' pagan antiquity. They describe, in sufficient detail and with evident expertise, the darkest and most odious aspects of Russian paganism – I shall begin with these, for the 'bright' aspects might tempt a reader sympathetic to Christianity to attribute them precisely to the influence of a religion with which he sympathises. However, it is unlikely that our hypothetical supporter of Christianity would wish to attribute to the influence of Christianity the practice of turning the head of a defeated enemy into a trophy (with a distinct hint of human sacrifice), or ritual suicides, or the joint burial of spouses (one of whom is buried alive). Moreover, all this is carried out not by some villains, such as the sorcerers Tugarin Zmeevich and Solovey the Robber, or, say, the witch Marinka Kaidalovna. No, these are the positive heroes of the bylinas, the glorious Holy Russian bogatyrs.

Let us take a closer look at these anachronistic motifs, these eerie pagan elements in Russian epics, which betray their deep, pre-Christian antiquity.

Chapter 3
A head like a brewing cauldron: the trophy skull in the bylina

It is not uncommon for a bylin hero, having vanquished yet another adversary, to treat the enemy's remains in a manner that is as irrational as it is unchristian. The body of the decapitated foe is cut into pieces and scattered across the field. The head, however, is impaled on a spear and triumphantly brought to the prince's court or to the bogatyr's stronghold. Sometimes, however, it is 'simply' taken away as a trophy. In the latter case, the hero will invariably emphasise the resemblance of the severed head of yet another 'little tsar' to a 'beer kettle'. Let us examine both of these motifs in more detail.

The first of these is particularly striking (Alyosha Popovich, Ilya Muromets). One is immediately reminded of the story, as recounted by Lev the Deacon, of the death of John Kurkuas, namesake and relative of Emperor Tzimiskes, who laid siege to Prince Svyatoslav's retinue in the Bulgarian city of Dorostol (now Silistra). The Rus' emerged from the fortress and attacked the siege engines and catapults. It was then that they came across Kurkuas, who was in command of all this equipment. Mistaking him for the emperor himself due to the splendour of his armour, the Rus' hacked Kurkuas to pieces, and, having impaled his head on a spear, carried it back to the fortress. There they displayed it on the ramparts and proclaimed that they had treated 'the lord of the Romans like a sacrificial animal'.

As you can see, reader, this is entirely in keeping with the behaviour of the epic heroes. The body is cut to pieces, the head is carried off on a spear and displayed on the ramparts. The words of Svyatoslav's warriors, however, reveal the underlying motive for their behaviour – just as they do for the course of action taken by the epic heroes, which seems enigmatic at first glance. We should particularly emphasise that in the epics, when the context is war rather than a single combat, the spoils consist of the head of the 'tsarishche' – the leader of the enemies, corresponding to
the 'lord of the Romans' in the Deacon's account.

The account in the hagiography of Gregory of Amastris predates the Deacon's work by more than a century. Its author reproaches the Rus' for their penchant for the 'ancient Taurian practice of slaughtering foreigners'. The ritual of the inhabitants of ancient Crimea, the wild Tauri, described by Herodotus (IV, 103),

ends with the heads of the captives sacrificed
'were nailed to a post' or, 'impaled on a long pole, were displayed high above the house'. Could it be that this custom—which, shall we say, is all too conspicuous—was the reason why, in Greek literature from the time of the same Deacon onwards, the Rus' came to be called 'Tauroscyphs', or even simply 'Tauri'?

Ibn Fadlan's account touches indirectly on our subject. He witnessed the Rus' sacrificing livestock to the idols of their gods. After the victim's body had been cut up, its head was hung on a stake within the enclosure of the sanctuary. This helps us to better understand the meaning of the Rus' words in Leo the Deacon's account – John Kurkuas did indeed share the fate
'sacrificial animals'.

This rite finds many parallels among different peoples at various times. A sacrifice of this kind symbolically repeats, and magically renews, the creation of the Universe from the body of the Primordial Being. The head, signifying the sky in this instance, is mounted on a pole (a wheel or spear), representing the World Axis, axis mundi, the World Tree. We find the myth of Creation-Sacrifice amongst the most diverse peoples of Eurasia – from Iceland, where
the giant Ymir served as the 'material' for the Universe, to China with its Pangu. The head of the sacrifice was mounted on a tree by the Indo-European Thracians (the head of Orpheus), the Semitic Assyrians, and the Ugro-Finnic Udmurts. And the very earliest traces of such customs stretch all the way back into the mists of the Palaeolithic caves – the Early Stone Age. In the Italian cave of Monte Circeo, a Neanderthal (!) skull was found with an enlarged foramen magnum, through which the skull was clearly impaled on a stake. On a pole in the middle of the camp at Kostenki hung, it would appear, the skull of a sabre-toothed tiger. We first encounter the likening of a vanquished enemy to a sacrificial animal as far back as in the hymns of the Rigveda – 'he who deemed himself the wisest lies as a sacrificial animal' (VII, 18, 8).

However, the closest parallels to the deeds of the epic heroes and Prince Svyatoslav's Rus' warriors are found among the Baltic Slavs in a fully historical period. In the 11th century, Bishop John of Mecklenburg was cut to pieces; the remains were scattered across the fields, whilst his head, impaled on a spear, was ceremoniously brought to the courtyard of a pagan temple. The same was done in Poland to Saint Adalbert.

Also of interest are the runic inscriptions on the so-called Mikorzin stones in Poland. By no means all scholars recognise their authenticity, but for us, the reader, a quite different question is of greater interest at present. What catches the eye is the content of the inscription, translated the year before last by Y. Letseevsky as ‘Smirzh lies as a sacrifice’ and ‘Smirzh, father of the warrior son Lyutev’, that is to say, here too *the* fallen *warrior* is regarded as *a sacrifice*. Even if we were to speak of a forgery, it is clear that the unknown forger had deeply internalised the subtlest nuances of the pagan view of the nature of a warrior’s death.

It is particularly worth noting that amongst the Scandinavians in historical times we find almost no traces of rituals of this kind – although, it would seem, all the prerequisites for them are present. There is a myth about Ymir, the sacrificial creation, and about the sky, fashioned from his head (‘the skull of the cold turs became the sky’). The Scandinavians were familiar with human sacrifice – but of an entirely different kind. An animal’s head on a pole is mentioned just once in the entire Norse epic – in a tale about… casting a curse. The famous Egil, son of the Bald One, poet, traveller and murderer, sorcerer and berserker, leaves his native land, banished by King Eirik the Great Axe:

‘He took a hazel pole and climbed with it onto a rocky headland facing the mainland. Egil took a horse’s skull and impaled it on the pole. Then he uttered a curse, saying:

‘I raise this pole here and cast a curse upon King Eirik and his wife Gunnheild.’ He turned the horse’s skull towards the mainland. ‘I cast a curse upon the spirits that inhabit this land, that they may all wander without a path and find no rest until they have driven King Eirik and Gunnheild out of Norway.’

Then he drove the pole into a crevice in the rock and left it there. He turned the horse’s skull towards the mainland and carved the curse he had uttered onto the pole in runes.’

A similar ritual, and presumably with similar aims, was performed three centuries later in England – the Angles were originally kin to the Scandinavians and came under their strong influence during the Viking Age. In 1255, thirteen (!) poachers severed the head of a slain stag and impaled it on a pole in one of the meadows. They then inserted a spindle into its mouth, forcing it to ‘yawn’ at the sun: ‘With the utmost contempt for

the king and his foresters'. The resemblance to the ritual of Egil is obvious, and the target of the mockery, it would seem, is once again the king. Belief in the malevolent power of rituals of this kind proved to be very persistent amongst the Scandinavians: an engraving accompanying a work by Olaus Magnus from 1555 depicts a sorcerer and a witch conjuring up a storm at sea that wrecks ships. The sorcerer holds the same pole with an animal's head, turned towards the sinking ships.

In Slavic folklore, there are almost no surviving tales of influencing the weather using a skull (originally, of course, the skull of a victim). The only example is a poorly preserved folktale in which 'Yaga has a dead head; when Yaga wants to bring rain, she puts it out into the yard; when she hides it, the sun begins to shine'.

Why did the ancient sacrificial rite of the Scandinavians turn into a curse? Perhaps by the Viking Age, the myth of the First Sacrifice had been supplanted by the myth of Odin's Sacrifice, who hanged himself from the World Tree – the ash tree Yggdrasil. Hence, the predominant form of sacrifice – whether of a human or an animal – became hanging, a practice repeatedly depicted in the sagas, in the accounts of foreign travellers – the German Adam of Bremen and the Spanish Arab al-Tartushi – and on the carved depictions of Gotlandic gravestones. A change in attitudes towards the Primordial Being may also have influenced the rite. Whilst the *Prose Edda* makes no mention of Ymir's 'evil' nature, Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* states it explicitly: 'We do not in any way recognise him (Ymir. – *L. P.*) as a god. He was very evil, and so were all his kin—those whom we call the 'dark giants'." The very phrasing of the question, however, suggests that the Scandinavians once viewed Him—from whose body the Universe arose—in a different light.

It is more difficult to understand the symbolism of the human sacrifices to Thor the Thunderer described by Quintilian of Dudon: the skull of the victim is shattered by a blow from a bull's yoke, and the blood from the slit throat is sprinkled upon the participants in the rite. As we can see, this has nothing in common with the rite of the Rus'.

Among the Baltic Slavs, however, we find a perfect counterpart to this. During excavations of sacred sites among the Baltic Slavs, human and animal skulls are found. According to Bishop Adelgot (1108), Slavic 'fanatics' beheaded prisoners before altars, which were then

decorated themselves with them – ‘Our Pripegala desires heads!’ The cult of the head is attested by numerous examples amongst all Slavic peoples. A horse’s head, impaled on a pole, protected the resting places of herds, stables and apiaries in Polesie and Polabie from disease and evil spirits, whilst in the Dniester region it was placed atop vegetable garden fences – ‘so that everything might bear fruit!’. In Rus’, a bear’s skull, loudly proclaimed as the ‘God of Livestock’, protected the barn above whose door it hung – it is curious that the image of Saint Nicholas was called and used in exactly the same way! Horse and cow heads on fences protected livestock and people in Russian villages from the bubonic plague, whilst among the Serbs and Bulgarians, the skulls of oxen, horses and dogs safeguarded fields, melon patches and vineyards. Such examples could be listed at great length. Sources mention a ‘head hunt’ carried out by the Semigallians, a people related to the Slavs among the Western Balts. Having intercepted the Lithuanians as they were returning from a raid on Estonia, they carried away from the battlefield sleighs full of the heads of Lithuanian warriors and their Estonian captives. The most intriguing aspect here is that the Semigallians’ allies in this battle were Christian knights-at-arms.

All this serves as further evidence of the Slavic, and by no means Scandinavian, nature of the Rus’.

The Rus’ custom of impaling severed heads on walls also finds a parallel in the bylina – in the form of courtyard and fortress enclosures studded with ‘the heads of valiant warriors’. This was noted as early as by V.V. Cherdyncev. For some reason, however, he believed that ‘in the bylina, this custom is observed only by negative characters’. However, a fence studded with heads is found not only at the home of Marinka Kaidalovna and Solovy-the-Robber (it should be noted that, although they are villains, they are our own, Russian people), but also at the home of Churila Plenkovich, a character who is, at worst, neutral:

> His estate stretched for seven versts,
> Around the estate stood a bulat-steel
> fence, The latches were gilded,
> On every picket there was a skull,
> Whether they were the heads of heroes or
> not.

However, Ilya and Alyosha, who bring back the enemy’s heads on their spears, are undoubtedly positive characters.

The second motif in the bylina is expressed much more subtly, through indirect allusions. Thus, an enemy's head (whether severed or still on the shoulders) is compared to a beer cauldron. It is curious that in the typical description of the enemy in South Slavic epics, this comparison is the only feature that coincides with the 'image of the enemy' in the bylina. The comparison in itself, of course, does not reveal much. Yet sometimes the heroes of the bylina speak quite frankly. Here, for instance, Alyosha Popovich returns with a head on his spear:

> Oh, you, Vladimir Stolnokievsky! If you've
> no beer cauldron now—
> Here's Tugarinov's wild head for you!

Ilya Muravlenin is just as outspoken. As he rides out from the outpost to duel with an enemy whom the younger bogatyrs had failed to stop,
the 'old Cossack' remarks mockingly:

> You won't be able to brew a beer cauldron
> without me; I'll bring you a head—a
> Tatar's head!

This refers directly to the making of a vessel for a ritual drink from an enemy's head. It should be noted straight away that, contrary to a widespread misconception, bowls made from human skulls are by no means a barbaric invention of some malicious 'steppe dwellers'. This is an ancient Indo-European custom, which originated somewhere towards the end of the Stone Age. In the Scandinavian *Prose Edda*, skull cups are mentioned twice – when the blacksmith Velund, taking revenge on Nidud, the konung who had captured and maimed him, kills his sons and makes cups from their skulls, bound with silver; and Gudrun does the same to her own children by the Hun ruler Atli-Attila, who had lured her brothers into a trap and killed them. The Roman Orosius recounts that the Celtic tribe of the Scordisci, who lived on the banks of the Danube, fashioned banquet cups from the heads of their enemies. The Indo-Aryan tradition is familiar with 'kapala' – bowls made from human skulls. Herodotus's famous account of the Scythians reads: 'With the heads of their enemies (not all of them, but only the most ferocious), they do the following. First,

they saw off the skulls down to the eyebrows and clean them out. The poor man covers the skull only on the outside with raw oxhide and uses it as such. The rich, however, first cover the skull on the outside with raw oxhide, then gild the inside as well, and use it as a cup." In 811, the Bulgarian Krum fashioned a cup from the skull of the Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros and drank from it at a feast together with the Slavic princes. For some reason, people try to see this as a Turkic custom, although Krum, of all the former leaders of the nomadic Bulgarians, was the one who had drawn closest to the Slavs – to such an extent that he sat at the table with their elders, sent the Slav Dragomir to Constantinople on his behalf, and was the first to replace the Turkic title
'khan syubigi' with the Slavic 'prince'. We have already discussed the ritual ablutions of his warriors before battle in connection with similar episodes in the bylina epics. Generally speaking, skull bowls are found only amongst those Turkic or Mongol tribes that retain a significant proportion of Scythian-Sarmatian and Indo-Iranian blood in their veins – the Bulgars and Pechenegs; or amongst those who adopted Tantric Buddhism, which came from India. Among the latter – the Mongols, Kalmyks and Buryats – such a bowl is called
'gabala' – a clear adaptation of the Indian 'kapala'. There is no specific word for these bowls in the Mongolian languages – it seems that the object itself was not part of Mongolian tradition.

In Russian folklore, there are a number of references to such a custom. In one song, a witch threatens a young man: 'I'll pour salt from your wild head into an endova'; in another, she describes how she carried out this threat and boasts: 'I drink from my beloved'! The Slavophile A.S. Khomyakov, who recorded this latter song, rightly compared it to myths about the creation of the world from parts of the human body and to the most ancient cults, such as the cult of the Black Mother Kali in India.

Finally, there is a fairy tale in which the protagonist, rather unoriginally named Ivan, takes his revenge, as it were. Having ended up in the underworld with the blind bogatyr Tarkh Tarakhovich, he tends his cattle. The warrior forbids Ivan from going to a certain meadow – nine young witches, the daughters of Yaga, fly there and can blind anyone who crosses their path – just as they had once blinded him. Like any fairy-tale hero, Ivan immediately breaks the ban and, when the nine Yagishen fly into the forbidden meadow, he engages them in battle, kills them, makes 'cups' from their heads
'cups' and presents them to the blind man Tarkh.

In light of all that has been said, I think we should take the motif of the skull-cup in Russian epics with the utmost seriousness. It turns out, however, dear reader, that two epic heroes—one of whom bears the nickname ‘Popovich’, whilst the other, as mentioned, has been canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church—essentially carry out human sacrifices and fashion cups from the skulls of their enemies! And how can one fail to recall the remark made by Fyodor Buslaev regarding the sacrilegious – from an Orthodox perspective –
‘deeds’ of Ilya Muravlenin?!

It is unlikely that such customs could have persisted within the druzhina milieu—whose way of life and customs are reflected in the bylinas—after the baptism. It was precisely this milieu that became the bearer and conduit of the new faith in Rus’. Many customs of pagan origin persisted there even after the adoption of Christianity, but certainly not in such extreme forms. So the bylinas containing the motif of the skull as a trophy could not have emerged after the 10th century. The same can be said of the next bylinas motif – ritual suicides.

Chapter 4
‘She cut her white breasts’. Ritual suicides in the bylina

The motif of ritual suicide in bylinas clearly attests to their great antiquity. Suicides in bylinas can be divided into two categories: male and female. The female cases (Katerina Mikulichna in the bylina ‘Churilo and Katerina’, Vasilisa Mikulichna in the bylin ‘Danilo Lovchanin’, Sofya Volkhovichna in the ballad, and Fyodor Kolyshchatoy’) are identical both in the reason for the suicide – which is always the death of a beloved man, husband or lover – and in the manner in which the heroines take their own lives. It always involves the heroine stabbing herself, almost invariably with two knives, upon which she throws herself ‘with her bare breast’. It is precisely this last detail that points to the ritual nature of the epic heroines’ actions. To simply take one’s own life in a state of grief and shock, a single knife would suffice. Indeed, there are quite a few ways to manage without bladed weapons altogether, which, alas, are ‘successfully’ – if I may put it that way – employed by those who take their own lives to this day. Both the uniformity of the method used to bid farewell to this world and its complexity point to a ritual rather than a sudden outburst of emotion.

The reasons and methods for taking one’s own life are somewhat more varied among the male protagonists. Thus, Sukhman, gravely wounded in battle against the nomads, and subsequently accused by Vladimir of lying and thrown into a dungeon—a ‘cellar’—simply rips the bandages from his wounds. Both the hero’s death and his name (Sukhman, Sukhmantiy) are reminiscent of the hero of the Norse epic, Sigmund, or Sigmund, the father of Sigurd-Siegfried. After the battle with his enemies, in which his patron, the god Odin, suddenly sides with the hero’s foes, Sigmund refuses to be treated and tears the bandages from his wounds. The warriors’ final words are also similar. Sukhman: ‘Oh, my bloody wounds… I fought valiantly for the city of Kyiv, for the kind prince, for Vladimir. He has forgotten… his great mercy; the Red Sun no longer shines upon me; Prince Vladimir has ceased to love me; now I have no reason left to live in this world.’ Sigmund’s final words are mirrored in their composition and the arrangement of the phrases – and are entirely

similar in content: ‘Many live on a sliver of hope, but the gods have forsaken me; so I will not allow myself to be healed; Odin does not wish for us to draw our swords, since he himself broke them; I fought in battles as long as it pleased him.’ It is simply astonishing that neither the Norse scholars—who have long and fruitlessly sought even the slightest hint of Scandinavian influence in Old Russian culture—nor the proponents of the ‘borrowing’ school have taken note of this correspondence.

However, Sukhman-Sigmund is an exception in the Russian epic tradition. Usually, heroes—like heroines—stab themselves, throw themselves onto a spear or a sword. V.V. Cherdyncev examined this topic in detail in his study, even mentioning rare manuscripts where a suicide ending—uncharacteristic of the plot—was added later. For instance, in one account, Bermyata stabs himself with a dagger after taking revenge on his treacherous wife, Katerina Mikulichna, and her seducer, Churila. Alyosha Popovich throws himself onto a knife, having been the cause of the death of his beloved, Alena Zbrodovna. Dobrynya Nikitich, humiliated by ‘the woman Latygorka’, throws himself onto a spear.

As has already been said, suicide is not typical of these characters and these plots. Bermyat usually chooses to live on; sometimes he marries the woman who has exposed unfaithful wife slave (sometimes he even spares even Churila, executing only his own wife). In most versions, Alyosha rescues his beloved from the punishment that his harsh brothers and marries her her. It is unusual for by his own weapon is also uncharacteristic for Dobrynya. The only thing that can be gleaned from the information by Cherdyncev examples is is how natural such an outcome is for the bylinic epic. However, for some reason, the researcher only briefly mentioned the bylin, which in any version ends with the suicide of the title hero (‘The Danube’), and made no mention at all of the one that ends in a double suicide (‘Danilo Lovchanin’). Meanwhile, both of these bylinas—in terms of both their fame and their dramatic tension—are perhaps the most striking in the bylin epic.

In a duel between archers, the Danube kills his wife, who is pregnant with a miraculous child. Shocked by what he has done, the bogatyr throws himself upon his sword, and the River Danube flows from his blood. The bylina about the Danube inspired the greatest Russian artist of the 20th century, Konstantin Vasilyev, to create one of his finest paintings, and the long series of sketches for it shows

just how deeply the epic's truly Wagnerian tragedy had taken hold of the painter's heart.

Finally, Danilo Lovchanin finds himself faced with the necessity of crossing swords with his brothers – his foster brother, Dobrynya Nikitich, and his biological brother, Nikita Denesyevich – sent against him by Vladimir, who had planned to marry Danilo's wife, Vasilisa Mikulichna. Danilo is faced with a terrible choice – either to become a fratricide himself, or to condemn his brothers to that fate. With the words 'Where has such a thing ever been seen – a brother going into battle against his own brother!', the bogatyr throws himself upon his spear. His wife, Vasilisa, asks permission to bid farewell to her husband's body and, when she is brought to the dead Lovchanin, stabs herself over his body. The words spoken by Lovchanin's wife before her death are of great significance:

> 'For we have a great law among us:
> 'Whosoever dies, let another take his place.'

These words clearly show that in this bylin too we are dealing with a ritual, rather than an act committed in the heat of the moment.

Contrary to Propp, there is no need to regard these words as a borrowing from the bylin about Mikhail Potyka. Both plots reflect the ancient custom of dying together; moreover, in the bylin about Potyka, the key element is not dying together but, as we shall see below, being buried alive with one's deceased spouse. Finally, Propp clearly based his argument here on his conviction that the bylin about Lovchanin and his faithful wife originated later in Moscow.

It is hard to disagree with P.A. Bessonov, the first publisher of this bylina: 'There is scarcely any work of folk literature—if we consider a single song rather than a series of them, such as the series of songs woven together in the Odyssey—that surpasses, in its dramatic power, this Russian song, in which the wife throws herself upon her husband's corpse as a voluntary sacrifice of conjugal love and fidelity.'

These are the two most striking epic plots associated with the theme of ritual suicide. It should be noted that the Sukhman River, or Sokhmat River, also springs from Sukhman's blood.

The antiquity of the bylin about the Danube has been disputed by very few. It contains far too many archaic features: Dunay's wife, the Polyanka heroine, their miraculous infant, and the birth of the river from their blood. The opinion of the Soviet folklorist V. Kalugin is telling in this regard: 'It is possible that this is, in fact, one of the most ancient plots in the Russian epic tradition'. On the other hand, a great many people attributed the bylina about the death of Danila Lovchanin and his faithful wife to later, even Muscovite, times. S.I. Dmitrieva was compelled to demonstrate the prevalence of this bylina in the Middle Mezen region – a region which she generally regarded as the most ancient place of origin and circulation of bylinas. From this, the researcher concluded that the bylin about Lovchanin was also ancient. I agree with her on this point, but would add that the best indicator of this bylin's antiquity is its very content – just as with all Russian bylins, where positive heroes end their lives by suicide (whilst negative characters in bylins do not do so).

V. Ya. Propp, examining one instance of suicide in the bylina, remarked with his characteristic Soviet formality:

'The people do not approve of suicides.' 'Do not approve' (!) – this phrase deserves a place amongst the most profound understatements in the history of humanity. Here is what the 'disapproval' of suicides by the Orthodox peasantry actually looked like – and there was simply no other 'people' in Russia at the time the bylina were recorded: 'The souls of suicides go to the devil. Suicides were regarded as the devil's children, and their homes were demolished. The tree from which a suicide had hanged himself was cut down… the place where the suicide occurred was considered unclean.

They were buried away from cemeteries, by the roads, at the edges of fields… The graves of suicides, especially during crop failures and natural disasters, were dug up and desecrated, and the corpses were pierced with an aspen stake.

At the burial of a suicide victim… they would pierce the body with a stake, mutilate the corpse, pierce it with a needle or drive an iron nail into its mouth…'

Try to draw a parallel between the desecrated graves and the poignant images of Danila Lovchanin with his faithful wife. The site of the suicide, considered unclean, and the river flowing from the blood of the suicide victim—the Danube. And not just any river, but 'the mythologised image of the principal river… The motif of

of holiness (my emphasis – *L. P.*) of the Danube, particularly in Russian incantations'. A *holy* river – made of the *suicide victim's* blood!

The epic's attitude towards heroes who commit suicide is, to put it mildly, unusual for the Christian consciousness, not only that of the Church but also that of the people. It completely rules out the possibility of these narratives having emerged not only during the Muscovite era but also in the Christian era in general. Orthodox consciousness and the Orthodox system of values simply do not recognise any circumstances under which suicide would be justified. The very way the bylina assesses suicides and suicidal heroes is the most striking indicator of its date. The bylinas reflect a more ancient system of values which, under certain circumstances, not only justifies but actually prescribes suicide.

Here is what the Byzantine historian Leo the Deacon writes about the pagan Rus': 'When all hope of salvation is lost, they pierce their own entrails with their swords and thus take their own lives.' Leo the Deacon explains this by the Rus' belief that captives (in the text – 'those killed in battle with the enemy', an obvious error by the copyist or by the Deacon himself), according to the northern pagans, remain slaves to their conquerors even after death.

It is difficult to say how reliable the reference by a court chronicler of Christian Byzantium to such deeply held pagan beliefs is. In any case, posthumous slavery, as a terrible punishment for those who break their oaths, is mentioned in the 10th-century treaty between Rus' and Byzantium. Some scholars cast doubt on the Deacon's account itself; however, it is corroborated (and elaborated upon) by other sources. Thus, Ibn Miskawayh writes of a young Rus' man, the last survivor of a group of Rus' who had been attacked by fanatical Muslims in the gardens of Berdaa: 'When he realised he was about to be taken prisoner, he climbed a tree growing nearby and stabbed himself with his dagger in vital places until he fell dead.' This makes it absolutely clear that they committed suicide not to escape death in battle at the hands of the enemy, but to avoid capture.

There is also a later reference to this custom – in the 'Secret History' of the Mongols, when the khans discuss Batu Khan's forthcoming campaign to the west, the 'Urus' are mentioned among the peoples they will have to fight; these people, preferring death to captivity,
'throw themselves upon their own swords'. It is difficult, however,

to suppose that such a custom could have survived until the 13th century. It remains to be surmised that the reports of the Mongol scouts either referred to some pocket of paganism in the east of Christian Rus', such as the aforementioned Murom or the so-called Purgasova Rus', or, as is far more likely, that the Mongols or their informants had heard Russian epics about pagan times.

Such is the historical background to male suicides in the bylinas. A similar custom was widespread amongst the warriors of pagan Eurasia – the Celts, Thracians, Germanic peoples – and so on, right up to the famous samurai seppuku of the Land of the Rising Sun. Among the Slavs, however, it is not often encountered – only in the Polish 'Great Chronicle', in the account of pagan times, and in the aforementioned reports concerning the Rus'.

Ritual suicides among women persisted for somewhat longer. Even Old Russian teachings ('The Word of St Dionysius on Those Who Wish') attest to the custom of 'cutting oneself for the dead' up until the 14th century. Accordingly, the practice of women's self-immolation – again involving the use of two knives, though the significance of this ritual remains unclear – is preserved in the ballads of the Muscovite era.

It is curious, however, that in descriptions by foreigners of the rituals of Slavic women dying alongside their husbands at their funerals—Mauricius (6th century), Boniface (8th century) and 10th-century Arab authors—they almost unanimously refer to suffocation. According to Mauritius the Strategist: 'The modesty of their women exceeds all human nature, so that most of them regard their husband's death as their own and voluntarily *strangle* themselves, not considering widowhood to be life.' Four centuries later, Ibn Rusta reports the same. Later, in the same *Word of the Longing Ones*, alongside the custom of 'cutting oneself for the dead', mention is also made of the custom of 'strangling oneself' for the same reason. Reports of *the slaughter* of young women at a man's funeral are found only in relation to the Rus'. The bylina say nothing about strangulation, only about women taking their own lives.

The question may arise as to how valid it is to draw a parallel between epic suicides and the custom of killing women at the funerals of their husbands or masters. It should be noted here that absolutely all authors who report on the suicide of women among the Slavs and Rus' speak of the voluntary nature of this act. Mauricius the Strategist, as we have seen, explicitly describes the 'departure' of Slavic women following their deceased husbands

as voluntary. Al-Masudi writes that the women of the Slavs and Rus' – he does not distinguish between these peoples – '*desire* to be burnt'. Ibn Fadlan asserts that a 'maiden' dying alongside a noble Rus' man volunteers to do so herself. This cannot be explained by the humiliating status of a widow or by the pressure of public opinion, which supported the custom of sati in India and sometimes still does to this day. In Slavic society, a widow is by no means a humiliated figure, but rather a highly respected one. One need only look to the Russian epic tradition – the 'honourable widows' (this very epithet speaks volumes in itself) are the mothers of Dobrynya, Khoten Bludovich, Vasily Buslaev and other epic heroes. And this is by no means the influence of Christianity. The Life of Otto of Bamberg mentions a widow living in the pagan Pomor region

'a widow… *highly respected* (my emphasis – *L. P.*) and surrounded by a large family, who actively managed her household'. So there is every reason to agree with medieval authors in their assessment that the suicide of Slavic and Rus' women was voluntary. And from there, it is but a short step to suicide. In fact, Mauricius himself describes the actions of Slavic women in precisely this way: 'they strangle themselves'. After baptism ('The Word on Those Who Desire'), the ancient rite came to be perceived as suicide, but one need not see this merely as a later form that arose under the influence not so much of Christianity as of the decline of paganism. In the Scandinavian pagan epic, the death of a woman at the funeral of her beloved is also depicted as suicide: 'Brünnhild *killed herself* for Sigurd'. It is quite likely that in the funeral rites of the Rus' as well, a loving wife – or concubine – might herself have performed the duties of a priestess, referred to by Ibn Fadlan as the 'angel of death' (on the other hand, both samurai seppuku and suicide among the Gauls allowed for assistance from one of the suicide victim's friends, whilst still remaining suicide).

Unlike male, military suicides, the female suicides described in the bylina cannot serve as such definitive proof of the pre-Christian origins of the bylinic epic, or of its emergence in a non-Christian, pagan environment. However, there is a bylin plot which, with the meticulous precision of a historian or archaeologist, describes the funeral rites of the pagan Rus' people of the 9th–10th centuries.

Chapter 5
‘The White Oak Log’. Pagan funeral rites in the bylina

Among other epic tales that allow us to confidently date the emergence of the epic tradition to the pre-Christian era, the description of a Rus’ burial in the epic ‘Mikhailo Potyk’ stands out. In brief, the plot of the bylin is as follows: the Kyiv bogatyr Potyk, whilst out hunting (or, in one version, on a journey to collect tribute), encounters a werewolf maiden (Marfa Vakhrameevna, Avdotya the White Swan Likhodeevna, and so on), who offers herself to him as a wife. Upon entering into marriage, they make a ‘great vow’, similar to the one that bound Danila Lovchanin to his wife, though not quite the same:

> Whichever of us dies first, Let the other, whilst still alive, lie in the coffin. And whichever of us dies first,
> The other, still alive, shall follow him into the grave.

After some time, Potyk’s wife dies, and he follows her into the grave. This grave is always described in great detail. It is either a ‘cage’, a ‘little house’, or a ‘log of white oak’. The bogatyr follows his dead wife into it, ‘with his horse and war harness’, taking with him ‘bread and salt, and water’ to last for three years. In the grave, in some versions, the wife turns into a serpent and tries to devour the bogatyr or strangle him, after which Potyk kills her – in which case, naturally, the bylin ends there. In other, more common versions of the epic, the hero and his wife are attacked by an ‘underground serpent’ that has ‘swum’ up to the white-oak log. The hero prevents the monster from devouring himself and his wife and either forces the serpent to bring him the water of life, or cuts off its head and uses it to resurrect his wife. The adventures of the hero Potyk and his treacherous wife do not always end there, but

their subsequent fate is of no concern to us in this instance. We, dear reader, shall focus specifically on the burial of Potyk and his wife.

Surprisingly, this epic, which describes the funeral rites of the pagan Rus' quite accurately, has received far less attention from researchers than it deserves. One reason, undoubtedly, was the abundance of ancient mythological imagery in the epic, a point noted by many of its early scholars – F.I. Buslaev, P.A. Bessonov and O.F. Miller. An ultra-rationalist such as V.G. Belinsky could only complain in bewilderment: 'It is difficult to say anything about this tale – so devoid is it of any certainty. All its characters and events are mirages: it is as if you see something, yet in reality you see nothing.' Such helplessness on the part of Belinsky—who believed that pagan mythology 'played no part' (?!) in the lives of the Slavs, and that paganism was easily (?!!) eradicated by Vladimir and left no trace in the bylina—is entirely understandable.

This makes the observations of A.A. Kotlyarevsky all the more valuable; although he formally belonged to the mythological school, he boldly drew upon the material from these epics—which would seem so fertile for 'mythological' interpretations—to study the actual funeral rites of the Slavs. N.M. Galkovsky also drew attention to the complete correspondence between the description of Potyk's funeral with his wife and the burial of the Rus' described by Ibn Rusta.

V. Ya. Propp merely noted in passing that 'this motif is undoubtedly extremely ancient and dates back to prehistoric everyday reality – to the burial of both spouses in the event of the death of one of them. It is also beyond doubt that in folklore… such a custom is condemned and regarded as barbaric'. Once again, the researcher attempts to ascribe a 'correct', 'progressive' viewpoint to folklore. The death alongside her husband of Danila Lovchanin's wife is by no means condemned by the epic nor regarded as 'barbarism'.

Subsequently, B.A. Rybakov addressed the same topic. He was the first to draw a comparison between Ibn Rusta's description of the burial of the Rus', the log tombs from the 9th–10th centuries discovered by D.Ya. Samokvasov, and the description of the burial of Mikhail Potyk and his wife in the bylinas.

B.A. Rybakov's pioneering work on this issue should come as no surprise. It is worth recalling that the results of Samokvasov's research were

published in 1916–1917, at a time when Russian society, to put it mildly, had little time for ancient burial grounds – there were not enough fresh graves – and then, as already mentioned, there followed years that were not the most favourable for studying the historical background of the bylinas. It was only with the end of the Second World War that the situation began to improve. None of the considerations set out above, of course, in any way detract from the value of B.A. Rybakov's observations – even his fiercest detractors do not deny his profound knowledge of the archaeology of Ancient Rus'.

The similarity is indeed striking. Here is Ibn Rusta's description of a Rus' grave: 'When one of their nobles dies, they dig a grave for him in *the shape of a large house* (highlighted by me here and below – *L. P.*), lay him there, and place in the same grave, along with him, his clothes and the gold bracelets he wore. Then they lower into it *a great quantity of food supplies, vessels containing drinks* and minted coins. Finally, the deceased's *living beloved wife* is lowered into it. After this, the opening of the grave is sealed up, and the wife dies in confinement'. The only things missing here are a horse and 'battle harness', though these are absent from most versions of the bylina. Everything else seems to have been borrowed from the bylina about Potyk. And the grave 'in the form of a large house' – a 'little house' or 'hut' (log cabin), in which the hero, his wife (sometimes even a horse!) and provisions for three years' time can be accommodated – is clearly spacious. Nor is it low:

> They built a little house, So that
> one might lie down, Lie down,
> and sit, And stand.

According to the story, the bogatyr in the grave strikes the 'serpent' with a sabre or copper rods, which also suggests a considerable amount of space.

In accordance with the epic, there is mention of food supplies being lowered into the grave. Finally, the most striking feature is that the fair-haired wife must be buried *alive* with him, in full accordance with the epic's 'commandment'. It is curious that in Kirshi Danilov's version, the epic ends with Potyk eventually dying, and now his wife is sent alive with him into the grave, this time – for ever. Thus

, the epic is found to correspond almost entirely with Ibn Rusta's account.

On the other hand, the archaeological parallels between the burials described in the epic and by the Arab traveller—in log-built tombs in the Dnieper region—are no less evident.

'These burials are usually found in large underground wooden log structures ("cage", "little house" in the bylinas; "a grave in the form of… a house" according to Ibn Rusta. – *L. P.*), covered with a log roof ("they covered it with an oak ceiling". – *L. P.*), a rich array of armaments ('war gear'. – *L. P.*), sumptuous garments and precious jewellery ('clothing and gold bracelets' according to Ibn Rusta – *O. V.*), the skeleton of a horse and luxurious equestrian equipment… In several cases, the buried individual is accompanied by a woman.' Rybakov supplements this description with a mention of vessels containing the remains of food and drink, which definitively aligns the archaeological picture with that described in the bylina and by the Arab. The burial data complement the picture painted by the Arab geographer and fully correspond to the bylina. What cannot be established archaeologically is whether the women who accompanied their husbands to the afterlife were alive at the time of burial; however, as far as I am aware, archaeologists did not set themselves the task of ascertaining this.

Thus, the parallels drawn by Rybakov between the accounts from the written source (Ibn Rusta), the folkloric source (the epic) and the archaeological evidence (log-cabin graves) are indeed evident and beyond doubt. Another observation by the researcher also merits attention – regarding a similar funeral rite among the Danube Bulgarians and, with reference to S.S. Shirinsky, among the Moravians.

What, however, is absolutely impossible to agree with is the linking of log-chambered graves – and, consequently, the bylina narrative – to Christianity. It is true that the Rus' practised cremation, which was utterly unacceptable from a Christian perspective. But alongside this, burial in log-built tombs also existed, and this was in no way connected with the new faith. Ibn Rusta makes no mention whatsoever of the Rus' being Christian and describes the burial rite specifically as a tribal one. In the Rus' chronicles, there are at least two references to burials in the ground among known pagans. Thus, before her death, Olga asks her son 'not to hold a funeral feast for her', without mentioning cremation at all,

which, in theory, should have horrified the Christian princess far more. It is telling that the remains of a trizna are found above the log graves – that is, precisely the rite which was perceived by contemporaries as non-Christian and which so troubled Olga. Even more intriguing is another account in the chronicle – concerning the baptism of the remains of two pagan princes, Olga's grandsons, Yaropolk and Oleg. It is clear that both princes had in fact been buried; otherwise, there would simply have been nothing to baptise. It is equally evident that they were pagans; otherwise, there would have been no point in baptising their remains (and it would even have been sacrilegious). Thus, whilst the Arabs say nothing at all about the religion of the Rus' people, who were buried rather than cremated, the chronicle explicitly refers to the burial (not cremation!) of pagans. Turning to that part of the epic which takes place following the resurrection of Potyk's wife and their emergence from the grave, it should be noted that B.A. Rybakov's interpretation of the wife's attempts to destroy Potyk (specifically regarding the events that took place after Potyk and his wife emerged from the grave) as a conflict between paganism and Christianity is far from indisputable. Thus, the condemnation of Potyk's drunkenness—which renders him defenceless against his treacherous wife's spells—contrary to B.A. Rybakov's view, is not a criticism of 'pagan ritual feasts'. Otherwise, one would have to assume that 'pagan ritual feasts' were criticised by Odin, the supreme god of the Scandinavian pagans, in the 'Speeches of the High One' and the 'Speeches of Grimnir':

> There is little
> benefit in beer,
> than many suppose; the
> more you drink, the less
> your mind obeys you.
> You are drunk,
> Geirrod! You have
> drunk beyond
> measure; from now
> on you are deprived
> of my aid,
> the aid of the
> Einherjar, and Odin's
> favour!

Equally unconvincing is the assertion that ‘the crucifixion of the Christian hero was a cruel irony on the part of the “heretical sorceress”’. Whom, then, were the Celtic ‘sorcerer’-Druids ‘mocking’ when they crucified captive pagan Romans? In general, crucifixion was widespread in the ancient world: ‘This most cruel of all forms of execution devised by mankind has a very ancient lineage. The Babylonians, Persians and Phoenicians crucified their criminals on the cross,’ writes the Polish author Zenon Kosidowski in *Biblical Legends*. Well, as for the ‘cruellest form of execution’, Mr Kosidowski has really gone too far; it is not for a 20th-century person to make such claims. Even if we were to set aside the Polish town of Auschwitz, we might still recall the basements of the Cheka in the 1920s or, say, watch detailed footage of an abortion to see for ourselves the false accusations levelled at the executioners of antiquity. But the fact remains that crucifixion existed before Christianity and independently of it. It found its way into the barbarian world of Eastern Europe quite early on – one need only recall the Ants’ prince Bus, who was crucified alongside his sons and elders by the Goths under Hermanarich, or the crucified slaves witnessed by Roman envoys in Attila’s realm.

Finally, in addition to the Eastern authors cited by Rybakov, Saxo Grammaticus reports on the existence of two distinct funeral rites among the Rus’, describing both: burial and cremation. He regards them as having been prescribed to the Rus’ by the Danish King Frothon, who had defeated them. Similarly, the Polish chronicler Kadłubek reports that the customs of the Danes regarding clothing and hairstyles are a reminder of the victory won over them by the Slavs, whilst an Indian tradition asserts that certain customs of foreign peoples (the Scythians, Iranians, etc.) were imposed upon them by the victorious Indian king Sagara. Therefore, there is no need to regard these customs as having actually been imposed on the Rus’ by the Danes. These customs are as follows: ‘That every head of a household… should be buried beneath a burial mound with his horse and all his equipment. (…) The bodies of every centurion or satrap, however, were to be burnt on pyres erected within their own ships.’ Once again, the Rus’ burial practices are described without any connection to Christianity. It seems that B.A. Rybakov quite needlessly rejected the ethnic explanation for burials in log structures (‘the tribe of log tombs’) in favour of a religious one.

Apart from the examples cited by Rybakov, the combination of cremation with burial in the ground was also observed among other peoples. In the Rigveda, alongside references to cremation (X, 19, 8), there are also hymns which are difficult to interpret as anything other than a reference to burial in the ground. Thus, the hymn (X, 18, 10–13) contains words addressed to the deceased: ‘Descend, then, into this gentle Mother Earth’, and concludes with the words: ‘May Yama build *a house* for you here’. The latter does indeed draw a parallel with the log tombs of the Rus’. The archaeological evidence of the coexistence of several different burial rites has been recorded amongst the Scandinavians; it is described and substantiated in the Scandinavian *Saga of the Ynglingar*. It states that cremation was invented by Odin so that a person’s soul might immediately enter the realm of the gods. Odin belonged to the tribe of the Aesir, the Norse gods associated with war, power and travel. Ingvi-Freyr, a god of the Vanir tribe who brought peace, love and fertility, was credited with inventing another rite: to ensure that a ruler’s magical power and good fortune did not leave the tribe along with him, the chieftain was buried, without being cremated, inside a burial mound.

The question of the origin and significance of the coexistence of these two burial rites goes far beyond the scope of this study and will not be examined here. It should merely be noted that, for some reason, the custom of cremation is scarcely reflected in the epic at all. It is true that there are instances of a hero burning a defeated enemy (Ilya burning Solovya the Robber, Dobrynya burning Marinka), but here it is very difficult to agree with Z.I. Vlasova, who saw in the latter case ‘a reminiscence of East Slavic cremations’. One might recall that the defeated enemy was treated ‘like a sacrificial animal’ (see the chapter ‘The Skull as Trophy’ above), and in that case it is more likely a sacrifice (though cremation also had the character of a sacrifice, both among the Aryans and the Slavs). But all this can be explained much more simply – both Solovey and, in particular, Marinka are sorcerers and werewolves. In the minds of the storytellers, their burning may well have been simply a way of ridding the land of evil spirits. In any case, positive heroes are not burnt in the bylinas.

On the other hand, descriptions of another burial custom can be found in variants of the epic – burial in a ship or a boat. I.Y. Froyanov

and Y.I. Yudin, in their work, identified the ‘white oak log’ specifically as a funeral boat. Indeed, the very description of the epic ‘log’, which must be ‘built’ and from which the ‘underground serpent’, having clung to it, tears off a row of ‘planks’, suggests the construction of Old Russian vessels, which were ‘logs’ – dugout canoes, ‘monoxyls’ of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, with sides built up from ‘tes’ planks. This is precisely how the vessels of Ancient Rus’ are described in other sources as well.

Apart from these, so to speak, external considerations, the researchers’ view is also corroborated by a whole series of references to a ‘white oak log’ in other bylina, where it appears as a kind of vessel. I. Ya. Froyanov and Yu. I. Yudin themselves cite one example here: the werewolf bride appears to Potyk:

> There floats a log of white oak,
> And upon that log of white oak Sits a little
> white swan.

Another example is given by B.A. Rybakov. Sadko, who is sacrificed to the Sea Tsar, is set adrift on a ‘log of white oak’. Sadly, when examining the epic tale of Potyk in the same work, B.A. Rybakov draws no parallels between the two epic plots and regards the ‘log of white oak’ in the latter as yet another name for the very same grave log cabin.

Finally, the last, and perhaps most intriguing, reference. In the ballad ‘Prince Roman and Marya Yuryevna’, the eponymous heroine flees from an ‘unfaithful’, ‘wicked’ land to Holy Rus’. A river blocks her path. On the other side floats a ‘log of white oak’; the princess asks the log to carry her ‘to Holy Rus’. After the log has fulfilled the princess’s request

> They carried that log of white oak
> to Holy Rus’,
> And carved crosses and
> marvellous images upon it.

Incidentally, it is known from ethnography that the South Slavs did indeed carve crosses from a ‘b’dnyak’ log, a Christmas log. Could this ‘b’dnyak’ with its hollowed-out centre perhaps trace its origins back to the sacrificial boats of antiquity?

F.I. Buslaev had already drawn attention to this ballad. Moreover, quite apart from the epic tale of Potyk, he compared this ‘log’ to a funeral boat. In the same work, he traced the etymology of the Slavic word ‘nav’ (grave, realm of the dead, the dead) back to the common Indo-European term for a ship or boat, a view fully corroborated by modern linguists.

As we can see, all the evidence from the Russian epic listed above supports the interpretation of the term ‘koloda belodubova’ put forward by I.Ya. Froyanov and Yu.I. Yudin. ‘Koloda’ is indeed a term for a vessel, but not just any vessel – such vessels are referred to as ‘korab’ in the bylina (the form ‘korab’ occurs quite frequently in the bylina; perhaps this is not a corruption, but the Wendish word ‘korab’, further evidence of the Novgorod region’s links with the Wendish Baltic), or a ‘nasa’ or ‘strug’ – but a ritual vessel, upon which one passes from the human world into the otherworld, be it the ‘Underwater Kingdom’ of the Sea Tsar or the underworld domains of the ‘underground serpent’. In isolated instances, its inhabitants (Avdotya the White Swan) or captives (Maria Yuryevna) use the same raft to enter the world of mortals, but generally speaking it is not intended for such a journey (in the ballad, the raft floats as if awaiting a passenger at the other, ‘Holy Russian’, shore).

The discovery by Y. I. Yudin and I. Ya. Froyanov cannot be overestimated. Until now, burial in a boat was considered an ethno-defining characteristic of the Normans. Opponents of this view could only counter it with general arguments such as the fact that one cannot deny the practice of burial in a boat amongst a people whose very term for a grave, the afterlife, and the deceased derives from the name of this rite. Yet Norse scholars, who attach so much importance to linguistic evidence when it supports their case, did not accept such objections. We can now confidently point to an authentic epic text, devoid of even the slightest trace of Scandinavian influence, which describes burial in a boat. Moreover, the bylinic ‘log’ suggests that the chronicle’s ‘great treasure’, in which the Slavs – the Vyatichi and Radimichi – burnt the deceased, was not an unspoilt ‘krada’

(funeral pyre), as had hitherto been assumed, but rather a funeral boat. Thus, the Scandinavians are deprived of their monopoly both on cremation in a boat and on the burial of the Rus' in this manner, as described by Ibn Fadlan. The custom of burial in a boat persisted for a long time among the Eastern Slavs. In the Ukrainian language, a boat (budara) and a grave are referred to by a similar word, and burials in boats dating back to the 12th–13th centuries have been found in the Ros River basin. In the ritual of the symbolic 'funeral' of Maslenitsa, which imitates a pagan burial, in some places the effigy was burnt not simply on a pyre, but on a ship. In connection with the custom of burial in a 'log', Buslaev mentions that even in his own time, the Old Believers buried the dead in *oak* logs.

A few words should also be said about the material of the 'log'. The ballad states that the log was 'carved with small crosses'. In the epic, however, one of the established epithets for the cross is 'cypress'. In a number of variants, the plank on which Sadko sets out to sea is called 'cypress' (in most cases, like the log, it is made of oak). This substitution serves as a reminder that the cypress in *The Dove's Book* is called
'the mother of all trees', since 'the true Christ was crucified upon it'. Scholars (in particular, Mikhail Seryakov) suggest that the cypress, in its role as the world tree, replaced the oak here. It is possible that the change occurred in the same way that ancient names were most often replaced by Christian ones in the bylina: on the basis of assonance (recall: Bermyat-Ermil, Saur-Saul, Saxon-Samson, Khoten-Fotey). One can reconstruct the following sequence: 'Kryakovisty, Kryakovist' (a common epithet for the oak in bylinas and Russian folklore in general) –
'karkolist' (a tree from the incantation 'by… the Sea of Okyan stands a karkolist tree; on this tree hang Saints Cosmas and Damian, Luke and Paul, the great helpers') – the cypress. The 'saints' (pagan gods?) 'hanging' on the world tree, like Odin on Yggdrasil, may also have contributed to the identification of the world tree with the cypress cross (in a number of entries in the 'Pigeon Book', Christ is crucified on the cypress itself).

The interchangeability of the oak or white oak (white – meaning light, holy, sacred) and the cypress in the epic confirms this view and serves as further evidence that even in the 19th century, at a time when the Russian epic tradition was still very much alive,

the process of its Christianisation—the replacement of ancient imagery with Christian motifs—had not yet been completed.

It is possible that the Russian expression
‘to gaze at the oak’ (to be on one’s deathbed). It is usually associated with the role of the oak as the world tree, but this is doubtful. Sayings denoting a person’s state on the verge of death more often reflect a specific funeral rite than cosmogony: cf. the Old Russian
‘sitting on a sledge’ (and the later ‘close one’s eyes and lie down on a sled’), and the modern ‘to have one foot in the grave’. In the same vein, Buslaev interpreted the Old Russian expression from *The Tale of Peter and Fevronia*
‘to gaze into the navi’, that is, according to F.I. Buslaev’s interpretation, to look into a funeral boat. ‘Dub’ is one of the names for boats among the Eastern Slavs. And it is far more natural to use the preposition ‘into’ when referring to a ‘dub’ boat rather than an oak tree (in which case it would be more accurate to say
‘to look *at* the oak’). On the other hand, it was precisely the role of the oak – the world tree as a mediator between the human world and other worlds – that made it the ideal material for a vessel to sail into these other worlds – ‘a boat of white oak’. It is interesting to note that the Scandinavians and Germanic peoples, when conducting burials or sacrifices in a boat, used oak boats specifically (Gokstad, KvalSund, Nidam, Useberg, etc.), and they did so specifically for ritual purposes; for sailing, such vessels were too heavy, too unwieldy and sat too deep in the water, as demonstrated by historical reconstruction experiments.

The epics contain no further references to burial in a boat, or indeed to any funeral rites at all. F.I. Buslaev’s attempt to interpret, as such, the legend recorded by Vladimir Dal about Dobrynya and Ilya, who sailed off into the Okyan Sea—‘of which no one had ever even heard before’—on the Sokol ship, is intriguing but not particularly convincing. The motif of the epic hero leaving the world of mortals in a boat is very common. This was the case with Arthur, Veynemeinen and Siegfried.

Let us return to the epic itself. It should be emphasised that the ritual by which Potyka and his bride were buried is not described in any version as the invention of a foreign sorceress. This ritual is performed by the Rus’ people of Kyiv on the instructions of a Rus’ hero from Kyiv. The only thing that puzzles the people of Kyiv is – once again – the vow to be buried alive alongside one’s husband, a vow proposed by this very sorceress. From this we may conclude that, in and of itself,

with the exception of the condition set by Avdotya, in the eyes of the creators of the bylinas this was a distinctively Russian rite. The fact that it is not mentioned in other bylinas is quite clear – only in this bylinas is the burial part of the plot; only here is it mentioned and described.

Thus, the bylina ‘Mikhailo Potyk’ describes two methods of burial – interment in a wooden log cabin and burial in a boat. Both are distinctly pre-Christian in character. Naturally, such plots could not have emerged in a Christian environment, just as burials in log cabins alongside wives and horses could not have continued in Kyiv after 988. The chronological significance of this motif was noted as early as 1960 by R.S. Lipets and M.G. Rabinovich.

Naturally, examples of pre-Christian antiquity in the bylina are not limited to these sombre themes – the trophy head, ritual suicides and funeral rites. No less striking as a dating motif is the archaic image of the sacred ruler, which in the bylina takes the form of Vladimir Krasno Solnyshko. From all these sombre landmarks—such as burial mounds and the fence posts of ancient sanctuaries crowned with the skulls of victims—we move further back through the centuries, to where the title of the ruler of epic Rus’ shines with the light of the sun, along with the beauty and wisdom of his consort.

Chapter 6
The Prince of Kyiv. The Sacred Ruler in the Bylinas

A close examination of the epic portrayal of Prince Vladimir ‘Red Sun’ reveals a whole range of highly archaic features which, when combined with evidence from foreign sources—primarily Arabic ones—allow us to push back the date of the origins of the Russian epic and the existence of the social and cultural realities reflected therein to at least the first half of the 10th century. We have already seen above that this has been noted on numerous occasions by a wide variety of researchers: A.A. Kotlyarevsky, F.I. Buslaev, V.F. Miller, I.P. Tsapenko, V.V. Cherdyncev, and finally, Y.I. Yudin, I.Ya. Froyanov and S.N. Azbelev. Let us examine in greater detail and more specifically the archaic elements associated with the epic image of the ruler of Rus’.

1. Svet-Slavich. The ruler as a descendant of the heroic progenitor

Few researchers have drawn attention to the fact that in the epic tradition, Vladimir ‘Red Sun’ bears not only the patronymic Svyatoslavovich. There are far more variants in which this character is given the patronymic Vseslavievich or Seslavievich. Since the chronicles knew of no Grand Princes of Kyiv with such a name and patronymic, this was tacitly regarded as a ‘distortion’. The exceptions were A.N. Veselovsky (see below) and A. Sobolevsky, who attempted to link the epic prince with Vladimir Vseslavich of Polotsk from the 12th–13th centuries, but such an identification was too obviously untenable. Meanwhile, this variant of the patronymic cannot be disregarded. According to V.V. Gatsak’s observations, in all early records the Prince of Kyiv appears as Vseslavievich.

The ‘chronicle’ patronymic predominates in epic records from the 1940s

, almost as if under the influence of ‘literary enlightenment’. Prior to this, it appears only sporadically; in records from the 16th–18th centuries, it is absent altogether.

There is another hero with exactly the same ‘duplicate’ patronymic. This is Volkh-Volga Vseslav’evich-Svyatoslav’evich. The similarity between the patronymics of these two characters was noted as early as by A.N. Veselovsky: ‘Volkh is called Vseslavich (Vseslav’evich, Buslaevich, Vseslaevich, Svyatoslavgovich, Svyatoslavovich, Seslavievich, Shcheslavievich); apart from him, Russian bylinas also attribute this patronymic to Vladimir: Seslavich, Seslavievich, Syslavich (it is telling that the patronymic Svyatoslavich is absent from this list, compiled at the end of the 19th century; this circumstance clearly shows just how late the ‘chronicle’ patronymic actually appeared in the epic. – *L. P.*). This places them, as it were, in a brotherly relationship’. In the case of Volkh-Volga, the double sound of the name, coupled with the double patronymic, led to almost comical consequences. The hero

were ‘attributed’ two completely different chronicle ‘prototypes’. Volkh Vseslavievich turned out to be the epic ‘reflection’ of the 11th-century Polotsk prince and sorcerer, Vseslav Bryachislavich, whilst Volga Svyatoslavovich was identified as the brother of Oleg Svyatoslavovich, the baptiser of Rus’. Needless to say, the biographies of both princes had, to put it mildly, very little in common with the plots of the bylinas about Volkh-Volga. The explanation is quite simple: phrases such as ‘Ilya Muromets, all Ivanovich’ or ‘Ilya Muromets, Svet Ivanovich’ are quite common in bylinas. No one, however, claims on this basis that Muromets had two patronymics! The ‘mystery’ surrounding the patronymics of Vladimir and Volga is simply a misunderstanding. We should be talking about a single patronymic: ‘Vladimir, son of Slawievich’ or ‘Slawievich’. It is unlikely that even this patronymic is in the modern sense of the word; rather, it is a family name of the order of Rurikovich, Olgovich, Monomashich and so on. It emphasises the prince’s descent from the eponymous hero, the forefather of the Slavs or Slovenes of Novgorod legends, and Slava of the Polish ‘Great Chronicle’. It is difficult to agree with those authors who regard this figure as a later invention of scribes. Eponymous heroes exist in the epics of a wide variety of peoples. One need only recall the biblical figures of Shem, Canaan, Judah and Israel; the Greek figures of Danaos, Ion and Hellas; and the Germanic figures of Irmin and Saxnot. Slav (Slaven, Sloven) belongs to a living epic tradition, rather than to the speculations of scribes at the close of the Middle Ages. Veselovsky also suggested the existence in the epic tradition of a hero

named Slav, the father of Volkh and Vladimir. He regarded the Germanic name of the father
of the ‘Russian konung Valdemar’—that is, Prince Vladimir—Gertnit, which he regarded as a calque, a translation of the Russian Vseslav or Slav (from *Hreidnid). However, this is not the place to discuss in detail the eponym of the Slavs and its reflection in the Russian epic. The theme of this figure’s portrayal in the bylina is explored in detail in the third chapter.

This patronymic links Vladimir to the world of semi-mythical heroes, the founders of tribes. It was precisely descent in a direct line from the tribe’s progenitor that, in traditional society, conferred the right to power.

2. The Red Sun. The Semantics of the Title

The identification of a ruler with the Sun is one of the most common motifs in world history. It dates back to the distant antiquity of the Sons of the Sun – the pharaohs of Egypt – and continues right up to the ‘Sun King’, Louis XIV, and similar figures of courtly rhetoric from the age of absolutism.

However, it is in Russian folklore and Old Russian culture that this identification takes on a very specific meaning. The ‘Tale of Igor’s Campaign’ contains the following series of imagery:

> Woe betide you, head, without
> your shoulders; Woe betide you,
> body, without your head; The
> Russian land without Igor.
> The sun shines in the heavens
> — Prince Igor in the Russian
> land.

The author of the ‘Tale’ seems to attribute this statement to the creative legacy of Boyan, a pagan semi-shaman, ‘Veles’s grandson’. In his commentary on *The Word*, V. I. Steletsky suggested that this saying ‘was… composed in connection with the murder of Prince Igor Rurikovich by the Drevlians in 945 and applied by the author of *The Word* to Igor Svyatoslavich’. Indeed, the ‘head’ and ‘sun’ of the Russian lands could more rightly be said to be Igor Rurikovich, Grand Prince of Kyiv, the conqueror of the Ulichs and Pechenegs, who struck terror

Byzantium, rather than his namesake, the ruler of the rather ordinary Novgorod-Seversky principality.

But this analogy compels us to turn to another source, this time a folkloric one. We are referring to the so-called ‘Pigeon Book’, which combines Orthodox religious terminology (Sabaoth, Christ, Jerusalem, etc.) and the social terminology of Muscovite Rus’ (‘the White Tsar – Tsar of all Tsars’) with the deepest Indo-European archaisms. The earliest records of the ‘Book of the Dove’ date precisely to the Muscovite period, but references to it can be found as early as the 13th-century hagiography of Abraham of Smolensk, in which the hagiography’s protagonist is even threatened with excommunication for having read it. Just as in the Rigveda (X, 90), both the phenomena of Nature and the strata of society in the ‘Book of the Dove’ originate from the cosmic body of the First God-First Man. Moreover, ‘the Red Sun is from His face’, whilst ‘the Orthodox tsars are from His honourable head’. A sequence of meanings and imagery is established: prince (‘tsar’) – head / face – Sun. The epic poem qualitatively distinguishes Vladimir from other ‘princes-boyars’, but in exactly the same way, the *Book of the Dove* derives ‘princes-boyars’ not from the ‘honourable head’, but ‘from the shoulder’ of the First Being.

The idea of a society as a body, in which the ‘tsar’ corresponds to the head and ‘ordinary folk’ to the legs, appears in the chronicle as early as the year 1015. It is curious that the chronicler attempts to disguise this pagan image by referring to the prophet Isaiah, whilst the text
‘Book of the Dove’ it is mockingly recounted how

> *the prophet Isaiah* himself read this book;
> he read the book for exactly three years,
> and read exactly three pages from the book.

Also of interest is the title ‘light-sovereign’ given to the epic figure Vladimir, which frequently appears in early records. It is interesting in that, in essence, it mirrors the Slavic title ‘chief of chiefs’ found in Ibn Rusta: ‘Sviet-malik’. The treaty of 911 mentions certain ‘bright princes’
‘under the command’ of Oleg, who bore the title of Grand Prince. Whilst our chronicles associate the latter title with Rurik’s calling and the founding of Rus’, the ‘bright princes’ of the early 10th century evidently correspond to

earlier forms of unification – individual tribes and tribal alliances. But in the bylinas, this is the title of the supreme ruler of Rus'. In other words, even the title of 'prince' reflects the archaic nature of the society depicted in the bylinas. However, we have already noted that the theme of marriage in the bylinas also dates them to the time of the tribes' emergence.

It's interesting that and more one fact. As previously mentioned, the myth regarding origin social social from the body of the First Being into the Rigveda and the Russian *The Dove's Book' are almost identical. Moreover, these two myths are the only ones in which not only natural phenomena but also parts of society emerge from the body of the Primordial Being. However, there is one significant difference: in the Rigveda, it is not kings or princes but Brahmins (X, 90; 12)—that is, priests—who emerge from the head of the Primordial Being alongside the Sun. The semantics of the epic's title emphasises priestly, sacred nature of its bearer's authority. The title 'light-ruler' also points to this – in the Slavic languages, the concepts of 'light' and 'holiness' are closely intertwined.

The Ipatiev manuscript of the *Tale of Bygone Years* contains a legend that directly links the concepts of the Sun, the tsar and the priest. According to this legend, Dazhbog, son of Svarog, was the first tsar ('Sun-Tsar'), yet at the same time performed purely priestly functions – he established the calendar and marriage laws.

This observation is further supported by the specific characteristics of the epic figure of Vladimir – characteristics not of a military leader of the tribes described in the chronicles, but of a sacred, holy ruler, a living idol of primal times.

3. The immutability of rulers. The ruler as the embodiment of the sacred Centre

These traits are particularly evident when comparing the epic image of the prince with Ibn Fadlan's 'Tsar of the Rus':

'In his very high castle there are constantly four hundred men from among his mighty warriors, his companions… These four hundred men sit beneath his throne… On the throne with him are forty concubines, and sometimes he consorts with one of them in the presence of his companions. He himself never leaves the throne… The Tsar of the Rus' has no other business but to consort with the maidens, drink and indulge in pleasures. He also has a deputy, commanding

the army, who attacks enemies and collects tribute for him'. Muhammad al-Hanafi describes the Tsar of the Rus' in a similar vein: 'They have a Tsar who sits on a golden throne. He is surrounded by forty slave-girls holding golden and silver censers in their hands, who waft fragrant vapours around him.' In this latter description, the role of the 'Tsar' of the Rus' as a living idol is particularly striking.

Here, first and foremost, what catches the eye is the fact that the 'King of the Rus' is surrounded by a number divisible by four – his concubines and his retinue. But even in the bylinas, contrary to the image familiar from illustrations and film adaptations of a long hall with tables arranged in 'poekom', there is always mention of the bogatyr entering the prince's inner chamber:

> …he bowed in all four directions, and to
> the prince and princess personally.

In exactly the same way, the kings of ancient Ireland feasted on a raised platform in the centre of a square hall. According to the ancient Indian treatise *Arthashastra*, the ideal city should be a square with the royal palace at its centre. In the middle of the hall stood Attila's seat, and next to it – his bed (which draws a parallel with Ibn Fadlan's 'King of the Rus'). Whoever the Huns originally were, by the time of Attila they had already absorbed enough of Slavic culture to live in wooden palaces, drink from goblets a beverage they called 'mead', and refer to a funeral feast by the Slavic word 'strava'. Thus, the layout of Attila's banquet hall was most likely similar to those of the Slavic princes.

The ruler is the embodiment of the sacred idea of the Centre, as V.N. Toporov explains in detail: 'Among the indisputable conclusions… of research into the institution of royal power is the establishment of the tsar's function as being more priestly (rather than royal in the later sense of the word) than administrative or political. The ancient tsar fulfilled the role of a priest who not only knew the cosmological structure of the world and was versed in cosmological dimensions, but also correlated it with the social organisation of society; more precisely, this tsar-priest determined, at the level of rules and religious-legal law, how a given social group

(or their collective) so that it corresponded to the cosmic order. Ideally, this correspondence could be realised at the centre of the world, defined as the location of the axis mundi (the World Axis – *L. P.*). This centre was the most sacred point in space. It was there that the king-priest performed a sacrifice, which was also regarded as an act of establishing a connection (verifying conformity) between the cosmic and social principles. It is clear that the well-being of this society depended on the king-priest's ability to locate this sacred point in space and time. Only by finding it was it possible to determine the place and time of the sacrifice and, through this, the entire structure of the space occupied by that community – the altar, the temple, the settlement, its boundaries (the four cardinal points) and its temporal coordinates." Thus, the priest-king personified the sacred Centre and, as such, had to be, if not immobile, then severely restricted in his movements. Vladimir fully meets this requirement, a point already noted by V.V. Cherdyncev, who contrasted the image of Vladimir with figures 'both of historical feudal princes, who were the first to initiate battle, and… heroes of feudal epics, for example… Charlemagne, who displays remarkable vigour'. One can agree with this observation, setting aside, perhaps, only V.V. Cherdyncev's linking of the epic to specific socio-economic forms—a feature symptomatic of the period in which his work was written. Following the works of A.I. Neusykhin, A.Ya. Gurevich and I.Ya. Froyanov, there can be little doubt that neither the Frankish society of Charlemagne's time nor 10th-century Rus', to which V.V. Cherdyntsev refers, were anywhere near deserving of the title 'feudal societies'. Moreover, the 'remarkable activity' is also displayed by Homer's kings—who are clearly not feudal—such as Diomedes, Odysseus and others. Rather, we are dealing with the figure of the military chieftain and the figure of the sacred leader. On the other hand, one can certainly agree with the main observations of V.V. Cherdyntsev. The Vladimir of the bylinas indeed
'never personally takes part in battles; he remains in Kyiv and, in essence, is the principal "sitting figure" of our folk poetry'. I.Ya. Froyanov and Yu.I. Yudin also drew attention to this, rightly linking it to the ritual immobility of the sacred kings described by J. Frazer. Finally, independently of them and of V.V. Cherdyncev, M.L. Seryakov reached similar conclusions, whilst continuing, however, to remain under

the hypnotic allure of the ‘obvious’ identity between the epic Red Sun and the baptiser of Rus’: ‘Vladimir is portrayed as an important but ritually immobile figure who never once engages in battle with his enemies, unlike, for example, Charlemagne or Arthur in the French and Celtic epics’. Consequently, Ibn Fadlan’s ‘tsar’ of the Rus’ never ‘steps down from the throne’ and ‘has nothing else to do but consort with maidens and drink’.

Nevertheless, one can still come across, in the literature, assessments of the epic Vladimir that are strange to say the least, all stemming from that same hypnotic conviction that he is one and the same as the baptiser of Rus’. And whilst B.A. Rybakov, in stating that the bylina ‘celebrated the deeds’ of the prince who ‘managed to lead the defence’ of Rus’ against the nomads, is merely repeating what he had maintained for almost half a century in numerous articles and books, it is far more difficult to understand a contemporary scholar when he writes: ‘The defence of the native land against the invasion of the “pagans”, peace treaties with ‘neighbouring’ lands, steadfastness in faith, the building of towns, just judgement and almsgiving, care for the poor and the sick – all these virtues are attributed to the baptiser of Rus’ by the narrators of the ‘old tales’, the chroniclers and the hagiographers’ (Karpov, A.Yu. Vladimir the Holy. Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 1997). The ‘old tales’ – that is, the bylinas – say nothing about ‘peace treaties’, steadfastness in faith, the building of cities, almsgiving, or care for the poor and the sick on the part of Vladimir the Red Sun. The prince’s judgement in the bylinas is, as a rule, unjust (he believes slander and imprisons Ilya, Stavra, Sukhman and others ‘in cellars’). One may assess the merits of the chronicle’s Vladimir Svyatoslavich in ‘defending’ the country against those who had been loyal vassals of his father and grandfather, and who, under his rule, had only just failed to spend the winter besieging the capital, in various ways. But the Vladimir of the bylinas simply takes no part whatsoever in ‘defence’, or indeed in military affairs in general. To write of him as the
‘organiser of the defence of Rus’ is only possible by turning a blind eye to the bylinas themselves. On those rarest of occasions when the bylinic Vladimir attempts to intervene in military affairs in any way, he receives a sharp rebuke from Ilya Muromets:

> And you, Prince Vladimir, son of Svyatoslav,
> Go back to your princess, Apreksenia, And go and
> manage everything for her,

As for us, you've no business with us at all.

And this is by no means rudeness towards an unloved ruler, but simply an emphasis on his role and his direct duties. Both —the foremost among them—and Ibn Fadlan, as well as the epic, regard marital relations with a woman—in the Arabic source, one of forty faceless
'concubines', yet in the epic it acquires a face and a name —that of Princess Aprakseya.

4. Princess Aprakseya. Marriage to the Earth and Power

Earth – Power – Woman

The figure of the ruler's consort became a subject of interest to researchers as early as the late 19th and early 20th centuries. J. Frazer was one of the first to address this topic in his book *The Golden Bough*. His study of Latin, Scandinavian, Greek and British traditions led him to conclude that 'among certain Aryan peoples… it was customary to regard the continuators of the royal line not as men, but as women'. Somewhat later, a number of scholars uncovered the worldview underlying this custom. The ruler's consort was seen as the female embodiment of his land, his country and, at the same time, his authority. It is interesting to note that the Old Russian term 'volost' combines both these concepts. This phenomenon has been studied particularly well in the context of Celtic material. Here we find the figure of Vlast, who appears as a hideous old woman but transforms into a beautiful lady after consorting with her; she first appeared in the saga of Nial of the Nine Hostages, and later in the tale of the sons of King Dare and numerous English and French novels. And the Irish queens of the same name, Medb of Connacht and Medb of Leinster. It is said of the latter that 'no man could become King of Tara unless she was his wife'. Saxo Grammaticus provides similar accounts of the Pictish Queen Hermtrude: 'Whomever she deemed worthy of her bed immediately became king; she brought the kingdom with her. Thus her hand and the sceptre were inseparable.' A. Krappe and A.K. Kumāraswami associate these women, who personify Power, with the Indian goddess Śrī

Lakshmi, the consort of Indra and ‘the personification of royal rule, the spirit of power, a relationship with whom is of a purely marital nature’.

V. Ya. Propp reached the same conclusions based on an analysis of Russian fairy tales, in which the hero often becomes a tsar after winning the hand and heart of a princess. In *The Tale of Igor’s Campaign*, the struggle for power by the sorcerer-prince Vseslav, the Polotsk werewolf, is described as an attempt to win his beloved: ‘Then Vseslav cast lots for the maiden he loved.’ It is very curious that in Ancient Rus’ tribute was paid ‘per kun’ or ‘per squirrel’ by the clan community, or ‘dym’. There is no question of profit here – half a thousand years later, when, of course, neither the forests nor the squirrels remained, the fine for a bruise in the Muscovite state amounted to fifteen squirrel skins. In other words, one fifteenth of the fine for a bruise was levied from the community each year. Rather, the point here lies precisely in the symbolism – both the squirrel and, especially, the marten represented a beloved or a bride in Slavic folklore. In the case of the marten, the symbolism ranged from the subtly spiritual (a traveller sees a ‘kunka’ leaping across the bed of the sleeping newlyweds – meaning that heavenly grace rests upon their marriage, and they live in love) to the crudest, most physiological (kuna, kunka – the female genitalia). Throughout Ancient Rus’, right up until the 20th century, matchmakers would tell the bride’s parents that they had come ‘for the marten’, following its trail. And by accepting martens or squirrels as tribute, the prince would, as it were, symbolically signify his union with the land and the community that had paid him this very ‘kunka’. It is no coincidence that in the bylina epics, a *marten* fur coat is a distinguishing feature of a ruler or, at the very least, a chieftain. Vladimir throws a marten fur coat over his shoulders, and uses it to hide from the terrifying whistle of the robber Solovey; the ‘King of Lyakhov’ takes shelter in a marten fur coat from the enraged warrior matchmakers, Dobrynya and Dunay. Such fur coats are worn by Duke and Churilo – Froyanov and Yudin have shown that these heroes of the bylinas are tribal chieftains. Ilya acquires a fur coat only in those bylinas where he already appears as the leader of the Kiev bogatyr retinue – a position he attained not without the help of Aprakseya.

It is curious that many of the heroines listed are attributed by tradition with a character that is, to put it mildly, just as frivolous as that which our epics ascribe to Aprakseya, who publicly reveals her connection with Tugarin and flirts with Churilo

Plenkovich, and attempting to seduce the beggar Kasyan. In Irish sources, the female embodiment of the Land is referred to as a courtesan; Medb of Leinster, in addition to her four lawful husbands, had numerous lovers, 'for it was her custom that the shadow of one man should fall upon another'; Guinevere, Arthur's wife, was unfaithful to him, and so on.

Aprakseya's flightiness need not necessarily be linked to the specific figure of Monomakh's sister Eupraxia, the 'royal harlot', as B.A. Rybakov did. This is simply the typical image of a ruler's consort, the embodiment of fickle, capricious power and fortune. It is telling that the 'frivolous' Aprakseya resolutely rejects the 'hand and heart' of Idolishche, the 'Tatar' who has seized Kyiv. So when Ilya or Alyosha speak of 'that w… Aprakse-princess', this is much closer to modern folk wisdom ('politics is a w…'s business') than to the 'royal harlot' of the German chronicles.

Aprakseya's 'debauchery' has been emphasised time and again. It is less often noted that this epic princess is also wise. Before proposing to her, Vladimir says, 'If only I, the prince, had someone with whom… to ponder matters'. And that is precisely the sort of wife he gets – Aprakseya's counsel is always wise; she saves Ilya Muromets from the prince's wrath; she advises him to make peace with Ilya; and, as we recall, she encourages and supports Vladimir when he is terrified by the news of the invasion
'Tatars'. And when Vladimir does not listen to her – for example, in the epic tale of Stavra Godinovich's ' ', where the princess instantly recognises a woman in disguise as the 'fearsome one' – he finds himself in a rather awkward and even comical situation.

Aprakseya and Ilya – initiation as leaders

The conception of Aprakseya as the Authority is particularly evident in the epic 'Ilya Muromets' Revolt against Vladimir', which, by a number of indications, appears to be more of a reinterpreted description of the inauguration or initiation of a military leader. At the beginning of the epic, Ilya organises a feast, which constitutes an encroachment on the prince's monopoly as the organiser of feasts and a claim to power, a fact that is stated openly on several occasions: 'Tomorrow I shall sit as prince in Kyiv', 'tomorrow I myself shall rule the principality'. Ilya shoots at the golden and

the silver ‘spires’ of the prince’s tower, which have already been interpreted by I. Ya. Froyanov and Yu. I. Yudin as a ritual challenge to the prince and a magical attack upon him—a view with which one can only partly agree. Shooting at gold and silver targets appears in the epic in the context of both a contest for power (in the bylin about Dobrynya and Vasily Kazimirovich, archery is one of the means by which it is decided who will pay tribute to whom – Vladimir to the ‘wicked’ tsar or the latter – to Vladimir), as well as in wedding rituals (‘Stavr Godinovich’). The latter can be traced back even further to fairy-tale plots: the selection of a bride by means of a bow and arrow in the fairy tale ‘The Frog Princess’, and an archery trial—entirely analogous to those in the bylinas—as one of the trials set by the princess-bride for her suitors; in a number of instances, the projectile strikes ‘the princess’s tower, so that the whole palace shook’, ‘the arrow flew to the Indian kingdom and knocked down the second storey of the royal palace’. In these instances, the resemblance to the epic tale of Ilya’s ‘rebellion’ is even greater. In general, archery as an element of the wedding contest between the hero and the ruler, and the marital-erotic symbolism of the bow and arrows, reach back into the deep layers of pre-Indo-European, Nostratic or ‘Eurasian’ archaic traditions. Of particular interest to us is the reference by the British scholar Robert Graves to a medieval English custom, according to which victory in an archery contest, in which the target was a *gold or silver* coin bearing the image *of a cross* (in some versions, Ilya knocks *gold and silver crosses* from churches to hold a feast on them – that is, he turns them into means of payment, into *coins*), and the prize was the love of the carnivalesque ‘Maiden Marion’, the May Queen, and the title of May King, the carnival ‘Robin Hood’.

Finally, Ilya finds himself in an underground chamber, where the same Apraksa feeds and waters him. Penetrating the ‘cellars’, deep into the earth, poses no difficulty for her – *she is the earth itself*. Even when the storytellers ‘in hindsight’ come up with some sort of
‘rationalist’ explanations for her entry into the ‘cellars’ (always different, which in itself suggests their later origin), Vladimir, setting out to free Ilya, never manages to do so in the same way. Sometimes she is replaced by her daughter, but this is of no consequence – in any case, we are talking about a woman

of princely lineage. The princess feeding Muromets is also symbolic. An old woman named Vlast offers Nyal, the future king, water from a magical well. Of this water it is said: ‘Your drink in the royal horn shall be gentle – heady mead and sweet mead, and strong ale.’ The maiden Vlast appears to King Konn in a dream, but does not lie with him; instead, *she offers him food and drink*. After this period of confinement, Ilya emerges as the victor over the ‘Tatars’ and the leader of the heroic Kyiv retinue.

We find the same motif in the epic ‘Tsar Saul Levanidovich’, where the son of the title hero is invited by ‘the cunning men of Uglich…’
‘tsar-king’, but upon entering the city they lock him ‘in deep cellars’ (Ancient Russian Poems… pp. 77–78). It is possible that this, too, refers to a ritual of initiation for a chieftain or ruler, which was not understood by later storytellers. Otherwise, it is completely incomprehensible why a captive, having been set free and supplied with weapons, is in no hurry to settle the score with his treacherous captors, why he does not simply flee in any direction, leaving them to their fate, but instead rides off to defend
the ‘men of Uglich’ from the enemy approaching the town.

Here one must agree with V.V. Cherdyncev, who saw in this plot ‘the custom of imprisoning the future leader’, which was ‘widespread in early clan-based society’.

We encounter a similar motif in the Scandinavian sagas – in the Saga of Sturlaus the Diligent and in the Volsung Saga, from which, as scholars suggest, this motif found its way into the former. In the Volsung Saga, this motif can also be interpreted as the final stage in the initiation of Sigurd and Synfjörðr as warriors and chieftains. It is telling that during their imprisonment in the burial mound—which, as in the case of Ilya, bears the hallmarks of a burial alive—the prisoners are aided by *a woman*: the sister of one of them, the mother of another, and *the wife of the konung*.

Finally, the attitude towards the princess of the bogatyrs and the people of Kyiv in general is telling. This attitude is very clearly outlined in the same epic tale about Vladimir’s betrothal: ‘If only you, brave lads, had someone *to* worship’, ‘And the whole fair city of Kyiv would have someone *to worship*’. Ilya Muromets, who, after being imprisoned in the cellar
‘brought down eight’ upon the prince, leaves the dungeon and undertakes the defence of the city only at the princess’s request.

The Aprakseya of the bylinas has nothing in common with the chronicle’s Eupraxia. If one must link her to a chronicle

character, then the wife of that ancient Vladimir from the Ioakim Chronicle would be the best fit: ‘Vladimir… had a wife from the Varangians named Advinda, most beautiful and wise; much is told of her by the elders, and she is extolled in songs.’ As we can see, everything fits: Advinda ‘of Varangian origin’, and Aprakseya from the land of Pomorya (Lyakhovets, Politov). Advinda is beautiful and wise; Aprakseya is endowed with both these qualities in abundance. And most importantly, according to the Ioakimov Chronicle, Advinda was the heroine of numerous epic tales (‘Much is recounted by the elders and extolled in songs’). And the change of name should come as no surprise – in the 19th–20th centuries, there was a constant shift in the epic from ancient, obscure names to familiar Orthodox ones. As we have seen, Bermyata became Ermila, Khoten into Fadey and Fotey, Saxon Kolybanovich into Samson Samoilovich, and Saur Vanidovich into Saul Levanidovich. The same could well have happened to the living goddess of the Earth and Power, the wife of Vladimir Svet Slavyevich ‘Red Sun’, Advinda. Another parallel to the epic figure of Apraksa is Ostasia or Ostansia, the wife of ‘King Gertnit’ (see above for this name), who ‘was the fairest and wisest of women’. In the *Tidrek Saga*, she is portrayed as a sorceress who helps her Slavic husband defend his ‘kingdom’ against the Goths and Huns.

The question of the ‘Tsar of the Rus’ having *several* concubines, whilst the epic features *only* Apraksa-Advinda-Ostasia, remains unresolved. A number of bylinas mention Marfida (Malfida?) Gorislavna as another wife of Vladimir. Fyodor Ivanovich Buslaev mentions 12 wives of the epic Vladimir, but I have been unable to find any reference to them in the texts of the bylinas. However, the fact that the number of wives in the bylinas is a multiple of four is again noteworthy (see above regarding the ruler as the embodiment of the idea of the Centre). It is possible that each of the wives or concubines corresponded to a conquered tribe or land (as has already been mentioned, individual clans or communities were ransomed by paying a symbolic bride price in the form of a marten or squirrel pelt). It is clear, then, why the epic king, Apraksa’s father, so resolutely refused to give her in marriage to a stranger, that is, to thereby acknowledge his
‘vassalage’, his dependence on Vladimir. A striking parallel can be drawn with the twelve wives of the Moravian Samo and the twenty-four concubines of the Prince of Pomorye.

Aprakseya and Kasyan – Power and the Magus

To conclude our analysis of the character of Aprakseya, we must touch upon the sole instance in which her beauty and wisdom were met with indifference. We are referring to the epic 'Forty Kaliks with a Kalika'. Forty wandering beggars, led by their chieftain Kasyan, make a vow to one another: if any of them, whilst travelling, lies, steals or lusts after a woman, he will be subjected to a torturous execution – at best, he will simply be buried up to his shoulders in the ground and left to die; whilst in some versions the punishment is described as a terrible, agonising ordeal, involving blinding and the pulling out of the tongue. The kaliks arrive in Kyiv, where Aprakseya falls in love with Ataman Kasyan and attempts to seduce him, but fails. The enraged princess slips a cup into Kasyan's bag, 'from which the prince drinks upon his arrival' (a custom whereby a wife greets her husband returning home by presenting him with a golden cup, as described by Priscus of Pannicia, again in reference to Attila). 'Exposed' by the princess's messenger, who had caught up with the Kaliks as they fled the city, Kasyan is put to death by his own companions. However, upon returning from their travels, the Kaliks find the chieftain alive, and whilst passing through Kyiv, they learn that the princess has been stricken with scabies and lies in a bed of pus. Aprakseya blames herself for having falsely accused Kasyan; he forgives her – and the princess is healed.

Many people believe this to be a purely Christian legend. After all, it deals with asceticism. Even such a distinguished historian as S.M. Solovyov once believed that the contrast between Ilya's moderation and Idolishche's gluttony represented a contrast between Christianity and paganism. In reality, paganism is familiar with both moderation (recall the 'Speech of the High One' in the 'Edda') and the most severe asceticism – recall the torments to which Odin subjected himself, hanging for nine days and nine nights from the world-tree Yggdrasil. The trials and initiations of Siberian shamans were no less severe. Indeed, even today in India, it is not some holy hermits but ordinary laypeople – clerks from perfectly modern companies – who spend weeks of their holidays sitting motionless within a continuous ring of blazing bonfires. Few people realise that the word 'monk' predates Christianity – it originally referred to the priests of Olympian Zeus, who led secluded and extremely impoverished lives in cells at the foot of their god's sanctuaries, wearing black

garments and took severe vows – a vow of silence and a vow of celibacy. Archaeologists have found similarly meagre dwellings near the temples of the Eastern Slavs on the Dniester. These prohibitions are very similar to those adopted by the forty kaliks and the kalika (the principle itself resembles the prince's entourage – Kasyan, who replaces Vladimir as the sacred centre, and the fourfold number of companions surrounding him).

The Kaliki themselves in the epic bear certain characteristics that suggest they were not originally Christians. They by no means refuse to take part in the prince's feast, nor do they turn down the delicacies and mead. Their distinguishing feature is a thunderous voice, comparable to the whistle of the Robber Nightingale – the prince's horse rears up. At the prince's court, they sing the 'Dove's Verse' – a semi-pagan composition, knowledge of which, I repeat, led to excommunication from the Church. On the other hand, something similar ('of life, of death, of the whole human race') is sung by the 'old elders' in a spell against the plague, in which one can easily recognise pagan priests.

But most remarkable of all is the figure of their chieftain. In Russian folklore, Saint Kasyan plays a special role. This is Kasyan the Stern, Kasyan the Merciless. He dwells not in heaven, as the other saints do, but underground (and the epic Kasyan is buried in the ground). There, it is unclear whether he strikes the devil on the head with a hammer, or whether, bound, he is beaten by angels or devils (and in the epic, Kasyan is subjected to a torturous execution). He is either blind, or his eyes are hidden beneath eyelashes hanging down to his knees, or even to the ground, and he is covered in fur and hair. (In the epic, Kasyan is sometimes blinded; at other times, his face cannot be made out because of his hair, which hangs down to his waist.) A protruding tongue is a sign of a corpse or a demon in the mythology of a wide variety of peoples – the Egyptians, Hindus, Etruscans and the indigenous peoples of Latin America. It is also familiar to the Slavs – in folk prints, it is bestowed upon devils, Death coming for the warrior Anika, or Baba Yaga. It was a feature of the masks worn by mummers portraying devils and the dead; with a long tongue hanging from her mouth, Buka – the terror of Slavic children – and the dark-faced Polevik roamed about. Other dark gods are also distinguished by their protruding tongues (Saint Kasyan in 'folk Orthodoxy', like many others, was referred to as a god) – Odin, the Wild Hunter, the Father of Graves, and the Black Mother Kali (incidentally, Ariel Golan, in his book *Myth and Symbol*, traces the word 'kalika' precisely to the name of this ancient goddess). Both Kali and Odin were associated with the realm of the dead (as was Saint Kasyan, and indeed

Ataman Kalik, who had survived his own death) and were the patrons of ascetics. A similar deity (the shaggy Veles? Viy with his locks of hair falling to the ground? Chernobog, perhaps?) was succeeded in folk Orthodoxy by ‘God Kasian’, whom Ataman Kalik must have served. He embodies a power higher and greater than that personified by Aprakseya. Worldly power, the fertility of the earth and good fortune – none of this interests one who serves the Lord of the Graves. The power of the shaggy, ‘hairy’ magi is greater than that of the princes, and it is precisely this truth—reflected in our chronicles, in the notes of Ibn Rusta, and in the accounts of German monks from the Varangian ancestral homeland of the Novgorodians—that the epic once again confirms.

5. ‘And you, too, kings and princes, are neither beaten nor executed.’ The motif of the inviolability of the priest-ruler

Thus, the first of the ‘duties’ mentioned by Ibn Fadlan turns out to be a priestly obligation. As for the second, drinking, things are not as straightforward as they might seem either. The Izhevsk-based researcher S.V. Kozlovsky has shown that drinking at epic feasts is the material embodiment of good fortune and magical grace. And the prince, who holds the exclusive right to present the heroes with ‘the enchanted green wine’, acts as the distributor of this magical power. That is to say, once again, as a priest.

Researchers also link the ruler’s priestly functions to the epic task of bringing back a ‘swan’ or some ‘ferocious beast’ ‘alive, unbleeding’ – surely this is for a sacrifice?

As the embodiment of the sacred centre, the consort of the female embodiment of Earth-Power-Domain and a priest, the prince is, naturally, inviolable. This is reflected in the epic formula: ‘and you too, kings and princes, are neither struck nor executed’. In Saxo Grammaticus’s account, we find an episode in which Yaromir, ruler of the Rügen Rus’, attacks two enemy warriors during a war with another Slavic tribe. He kills one, but his spear becomes lodged in the body. The second raises his weapon, but, realising that he has raised his hand against the prince, he throws down his weapon and falls prostrate. ‘Such is the reverence amongst this people for those invested with high office,’ concludes the chronicler. It is curious that, of all the characteristics of the sacred ruler, this one alone left some trace in the chronicle: ‘Prince

Mstislav Yuryevich rode three times through the regiments of Yury and Yaroslavl… And Alexander Popovich came upon him, and, with his sword drawn, was about to strike him down. But he cried out, saying, 'I am Prince Mstislav.' And Alexander Popovich said to him: 'Prince, do not presume, but stand and watch. For if you are slain, what will become of the others, and where will their children go?' The appearance of Alexander (Alyosha?) Popovich in the quoted passage (*from the very same* Nikon Chronicle) is noteworthy. Might the ideology of the bylinas have influenced the chronicle's text?

But on the whole, such an attitude towards princes was uncharacteristic of medieval Rus' in the 10th–12th centuries. Princes led their druzhinas into battle, fought and often perished.

The prince's court is also sacred. It is characteristic that the heroes of the bylinas almost never kill enemies within the prince's court. Alyosha Popovich forbids his young retainer from retaliating against Tugarin's attack—who had thrown a knife at them—and from 'staining the white-stoned chambers with blood', instead challenging the enemy 'in the field'. Ilya Muromets also takes the captured bandit Solovey 'out into the field' to be executed. In exactly the same way, the prince's court was sacred to the pagan Pomorians; anyone who set foot within it was inviolable. The Baltic Slavs held a similar view of their sanctuaries, and 'the site where a temple stands must not be defiled by blood, even in times of war'. Consequently, just like the court of the Pomor prince, sanctuaries often became a refuge for those facing mortal danger.

Thus, the epic figure of Prince Vladimir is highly archaic. His authority is based on his descent from a tribal hero-progenitor; he is a sacred, 'Solar' priest-king, a prisoner of his own priestly office, bound to the ritual 'Centre' of the tribal lands. He is the husband of the female embodiment of the Earth-Power-Domain. His role is to be her spouse and to distribute, at ritual feasts, the magical, sacred drink, the embodiment of good fortune and grace. It is not Vladimir, who has no military functions whatsoever, who is in charge of Kyiv's military affairs, but Ilya Muravlenin – the very same 'deputy' mentioned by Ibn Fadlan. It is he who 'commands the army and attacks the enemies' – the 'Tatars' of the epic tales. In a number of epics, it is he who sends the bogatyrs to collect tribute from the conquered lands. Moreover, it is said that

It is not Vladimir who devises the plans,
It is the old Cossack Ilya Muromets who devises them.

It is striking that Ibn Fadlan's portrayal of the 'tsar' of the Rus' practically coincides with the image of Vladimir Krasno-Solnyshko as depicted in the bylina. It is equally evident that even for Ibn Fadlan's era, this image is far too archaic. A contemporary of the Arab traveller, Igor Rurikovich, took a very active part in military campaigns – a fact noted not only by chroniclers writing a century after his death, but also by his foreign contemporaries (Leo the Deacon, Liutprand) – and, as the story of his death shows, was by no means regarded as untouchable by his Slavic subjects. These two circumstances suggest that Ibn Fadlan simply heard the Rus' epic songs – the very ones that formed the basis of the bylinas. Thus, the archaic image of a sacred ruler, entangled in a complex web of taboos and magical beliefs, serves as a dating indicator, allowing us to trace the origins of the Rus' epic back to a time far preceding not only his chronicle namesake—who, for three centuries now, has been revered without any basis as his prototype—but also the grandfather of this namesake, Igor Rurikovich.

Let us return, however, to the conclusion that Ibn Fadlan may have heard bylinas – or, if you will, 'proto-bylinas' – from the Rus' in the mid-10th century. Taken together with the striking similarity between Ibn Rusta's description of a Rus' burial and the funeral of Potyk and his wife in the bylin, right down to such a detail – which is, after all, more likely of epic origin – as the burial of the deceased man's *living* wife, this conclusion compels one to agree with the words of R.S. Lipets, already quoted: 'By the end of the 10th century, a rich epic tradition already existed. Even in the time of Igor and Oleg, and perhaps as early as the 9th century, epic tales had already taken their place in the cultural life of Rus'." It is evident that the bylina recorded in the 19th and 20th centuries fairly accurately reproduced those 10th-century epic tales that served as a source for Arab travellers and geographers. Thus, whilst the study of pre-Christian features in the bylina leads us to conclude that the origins of the bylinic epic must be dated to a time prior to the baptism of Rus' in 988, the clear influence on

epic songs—which had already taken shape and were already archaic for that period—on Arab authors of the mid-10th century allows us to state with confidence that the Russian bylinas have even deeper roots.

However, this answer is, first of all, far too general. Yes, deep roots – but just how deep exactly? Which specific era gave rise to the Russian bylina, and what historical conditions – social, ethnic, geographical, and so on? This is by no means an idle question. For the dating criteria of the bylina take us too far back into the past. In the 10th century, in the time of Ibn Fadlan and Ibn Rusta, the Rus' were still a very young people. Suffice it to say that Igor Rurikovich was the second representative of the dynasty whose founder is associated with the arrival of the Rus' in Eastern Europe and the founding of the Rus' state. He was also the first Rus' prince of Kyiv on the Dnieper. Kyiv itself on the Dnieper, like other Eastern European cities mentioned in the bylina – Chernihiv, Smolensk – had, by the 10th century, only just begun to take shape as conglomerates of several settlements. At the same time, as is well known, in the bylina it is precisely Kyiv that is the capital of Rus', and all the principal heroes identify themselves as 'the heroes of Holy Rus'', and their land as 'Holy *Rus*'. And if the bylina existed in the time of Igor Rurikovich, the question naturally arises: where and when were they composed? And, most importantly, by whom? To be more specific: if the bylina were the epic of a tribe, then of which tribe or tribes exactly? The third part of this work is devoted to answering this question.

Part Three:
Bylinic Rus’

Chapter 1
To the Origins: Relics of the Tribal Epic of the Ilmen Slavs in the Bylinas

In the search for the tribe whose epic formed the basis of Russian bylina, it seems logical to turn to those characters from the epic whom researchers have long regarded as a reflection of the tribal era. Foremost among these is Volkh, also known as Volga. Since some studies, including those utilised in this work, continue to consider
'historical' interpretations of this figure and even regard the identity of Volga with Oleg Svyatoslavich, and that of Volkh with Vseslav of Polotsk, as 'proven', it is necessary to state my position on this matter.

Firstly, the identity of Volga and Volkh is a fact. B.A. Rybakov, who assessed this identity as 'isolated minor details, similar in both cycles', to put it mildly, strayed from the truth. These
'minor details' consist of: the names of the heroes; the plot itself in one of the two bylina about Volga and the sole bylina about Volkh; and the description of the hero's birth and youth in both bylina about Volga and the sole one about Volkh. To put it simply, apart from these
'details', all that remains of Volga is his encounter with Mikula, and of Volkh – absolutely nothing.

Secondly, the 'prototypes' of Volga and Volkh identified by the historical school—whose biographies, as mentioned above, have very little in common with the plots of the bylinas—should forever take their place in the history of bylinology as examples of a curious extreme.

Far more valuable is the observation by F.I. Buslaev and N.I. Kostomarov regarding the identity of Volga-Volkh with the eponymous hero Volkh or Volkhv—known from later Novgorod records of the 16th–17th centuries—the son of Slaven, the eponym of the Ilmen Slavs. Kostomarov, moreover, rightly refused to regard the legends about these figures, as recorded in the 'Ioakim Chronicle', the 'Mazurinsky Chronicle' and a number of other sources, as idle fabrications by later scribes. Of course, traces

of literary adaptation are present in the versions of the tales that have come down to us – just as they are present, for example, in the *Book of the Conquest of Ireland* or the *Prose Edda*. However, they are based on toponymic and aetiological traditions, well known to folklorists, and on tribal epic poetry. In considering the epic prince as a descendant of an eponym, I have already noted that such heroes exist in the epics of many peoples. M.M. Plisetsky pointed out that the heroes of the epics of many primitive tribes are named simply after their tribal affiliation – 'Gilyak', 'Our Gilyak'. It is quite possible that this is precisely how eponymous heroes came into being – namesakes of their people, all these Czechs, Lechs, Rus, Saxonots, Hellenes and Israelites. Meanwhile, researchers have already noted a certain resonance between these tales and the accounts of the so-called 'false sagas' or 'sagas of ancient times'. Scholars raise the question of the presumed existence of a 'lost, conventionally "north-eastern European" epic', seeing its remnants, in particular, in the accounts of the 'Chronicle of Joachim'. As we recall, S.N. Azbelev attached great importance to the parallels between the information in this chronicle and the accounts in the 'Tidrek Saga', one of
'false sagas', was considered of great significance by S.N. Azbelev. For us, these conclusions are all the more convincing given that, when discussing the tribal origins of the bylinic epic—an epic that existed within the territory inhabited by the Novgorodians—it would be natural to seek in the bylinas the remnants of the tribal epic of the Novgorodians' ancestors: the Ilmen Slavs. Here we shall examine a number of bylina that clearly echo Novgorod legends, as yet another fragment of the 'North-Eastern European' epic.

Chapter 2
‘From Beyond the Viryay Sea’: the Sloven-Nightingale Budimirovich

The bylina about Solovey Budimirovich has long attracted the attention of scholars due to its striking lack of conflict, which is unusual for an epic. Its inclusion in the Kyiv cycle appears somewhat contrived. In the course of this inclusion, two endings to the bylina emerged, characteristic of the bylinas of the Kyiv cycle and largely coinciding with them in terms of text. Thus, the ending in which Solovey arrives unrecognised at his wife’s wedding is borrowed from the bylin about Dobryna and Alyosha Popovich. The other ending, recorded later, is based on a motif standard to the Kyiv bylin cycle: an enemy army approaching the city whilst the hero is away. Clearly, Filon Kmyta of Chernobyl, when saying that he, like Ilya Muravlenin and Solovey Budimirovich, has been forgotten but will be remembered when the need arises, is referring precisely to this plot – which confirms once again that, when it comes to bylinas, ‘recorded later’ does not always mean ‘late’.

Specifically, the following events relate to Solovy: his arrival from a certain ‘overseas’ land across the Varangian or Volyn Sea from the ‘Green Sea’s remote reaches’, past the ‘town of Ledents’; his construction of a marvellous tower and courtyard; and, finally, his marriage.

The deeds of Slaven in the Novgorod legends, if stripped of the embellishments and scholarly pretensions of the Moscow-era copyists – just as Irish scribes traced eponymous heroes and forefathers back to Greece, Scythia and even Egypt; just as Snorri Sturluson had the Aesir, led by Odin, come to Scandinavia from Homer’s Troy, so too did the Novgorodians have Slaven journey to Ilmen from ‘Euxinopontus’, – all follow the same pattern: arrival in the lands of Ilmen, the construction of a settlement, and the establishment of a lineage in the new lands.

It is clear that in the story of Soloviy Budimirovich, the semantic ‘centre of gravity’ lies precisely in the marriage, which is, moreover, entirely devoid of any drama. It is equally evident that the only marriage which, in and of itself, can become the subject of a tribal

epic is the marriage of the clan's progenitor—the very act of founding the clan.

As we recall, A.N. Veselovsky identified the bylinic Soloviy Budimirovich with a hero named Slav, the father of Vladimir and Volkh. It is precisely under the name Slav that the eponym of the Slavs appears in the 'Great Chronicle'. In Novgorod, the name Sloviša – 'nightingale', inscribed on a gusli either by the bearer himself or by an unknown carver commissioned by him. If we drop the diminutive suffix, we get 'Slovey', which is extremely close to the Novgorod name of the heroic forefather – 'Sloven'. It has already been mentioned many times above that the ancestors of the Ilmen Slovenes were colonists from the lands of the Baltic Slavs. With the help of the bylina, we can discover the route by which they reached these new lands.

The epic describes, rather, a maritime colonisation of new lands, which is by no means implausible – as seafarers and warriors, the Baltic Slavs were every bit as capable as the Vikings. From 'Gluhomorye Zelenskoye', that is, Zeeland, in the south-western corner of the Baltic, past Ledenets-Lindanissa, the tribal stronghold of the Estonians, via Viryay (Varyazh), or Volyn (from the Slavic stronghold of Volyn-Volin), the ancestors of the Slovenes made their way across the sea to Lake Ladoga and Lake Ilmen. The epic describes the entire migration as the journey of a forefather and pioneer.

Chapter 3
The Wars of the Werewolf: Volkh Slavyich and his campaign to 'India'

Volkh is described in much the same way in the epic and in later chronicle traditions. He is a sorcerer-prince and a werewolf. However, whilst the theme of werewolfism and sorcery, which became central to the authors of the legends, plays a secondary, supporting role as a backdrop in the bylina, the bylina focuses primarily on the campaigns undertaken by the descendants of Slaven-Slavey, which the chronicle traditions mention only in passing. In the first campaign, Volkh-Volga conquers a certain 'kingdom' known as the Indian Kingdom. In the second, he encounters the marvellous ploughman Mikula.

The first tale about Volkh recounts his campaign at the head of an army of unmarried young men against the 'Indian Kingdom' (in later and clearly distorted versions – the Land of the Turks, the Golden Horde); using his shape-shifting powers, he clothes and feeds his retinue with the spoils of the hunt, conducts reconnaissance in the enemy city, and finally captures it, slaughtering the entire population except for the young women to be brides for himself and his retinue. Then Volkh and his retinue divide the spoils and settle in the captured city, marrying the captives. The landscape of the bylin is telling – it consists of forest and sea. Not a word is said of the 'open, clear field', that typical setting of 'Kyiv' bylinas.

Researchers have often been perplexed by the apparent literary style and incongruity of the 'Indian Kingdom' in such an archaic epic. However, V.B. Vilinbakhov and N.B. Engovatov, having analysed a vast range of sources dating from antiquity to the High Middle Ages, concluded that a land and a tribe with a similar name existed in the Baltic region.

Sophocles speaks of the Indians gathering amber, which reliably locates this 'India' in the south-eastern Baltic region. Cornelius Nepos speaks of Indian merchants whose ship was washed ashore on the coast of Batavia. The same story is subsequently repeated twice, most recently in 1153, when a barque carrying 'Indian' merchants was washed ashore at Lübeck. In the Russian epic, 'India' is definitely

is situated on the shores of the Baltic Sea. It is interesting to note that, in this context, ‘Turkish Land’ may also prove to be of significance. In any case, Adam of Bremen mentions certain Turks on the south-eastern shore of the Baltic Sea, whilst the Estonian epic ‘Kalevipoeg’ features a certain land
‘Turja’ or ‘Tuurja’, to which the Estonian hero does not have to cross the sea to reach. A number of epic tales mention ‘Rich India’ as being relatively close to Korela (and it is possible to ride from the former to the latter and vice versa on horseback, across certain ‘marshes’ inhabited by ‘bandits’). In a number of epics, Sadko sails off to ‘India’. One might add evidence, overlooked by researchers, from the medieval Jewish source *Iosippon*, which mentions a certain place-name or ethnonym, Indanya, again near the Baltic shores. The names of the rulers of the ‘Indian land’ – Tsar Santal and Queen Azvyakovna (Yatvyagovna?) – also point to these same regions. Saxo Grammaticus reports that the Slavic Wends conquered the Curonians, the Sembs and the SANTALS. ‘The antagonist here is even deprived of a name; his name is simply the name of the hostile tribe or clan.’

Based on the body of evidence, it can be surmised that the ‘India’ of the epic ballads was situated in the south-eastern corner of the Baltic region, possibly on the banks of the Vindava River. All the more so as later sources (primarily the chronicler of the Teutonic Order, Henry of Latvia) note clear signs of Wendish colonisation there – namely, the Wendish people themselves, the Slavic names of Livonian chieftains (Dabrela, Rusin), and the worship of the god Tarapita – an idol of a similar name on Rügen is known from
the *Knitlingasaga* – a divination ritual involving leading a horse consecrated to the deity through crossed spears (as in Radigoszcz, Arkona and Szczecin); and, finally, a plough offering (as practised by the Polabian Wends, the Poles and the Vyatichi with the Radimichi).

In the south-east of the Baltic region during the 6th–13th centuries, a combination of archaeological and written sources reveals an ethnic group equally linked to both the Obodrite region of Mecklenburg and Novgorod. Evidently, these were the descendants of the Wendish colonists – the warriors of Volkh. The Wends in Latvia are mentioned by the same Henry. The Ventini – an ethnic group of Latvians – still live in those regions to this day.

The ethnic nature of the ‘Indians’ conquered by Volkh is unclear. The Engovats and Vilinbahs regard them as Slavs, whilst A.G. Kuzmin sees them as

an Indo-Aryan relic, but it is most likely that they were a Baltic tribe. However, this is of no fundamental importance.

It is unclear why the epic attributes this campaign to the son of the first ancestor and pioneer, Solovey-Sloven, rather than to him himself. The suggestion that the ‘Indian Kingdom’ had already been conquered by Ladoga or Ilmen colonists seems rather far-fetched.

Chapter 4
The Riddles of the Miracle Ploughman: Mikula Selyaninovich

One of the bylina that has not received a convincing interpretation, precisely because of its popularity amongst researchers, is the bylina 'Volga and Mikula'. As already mentioned, the Slavophile and Narodnik enthusiasms of the Russian intelligentsia did a disservice to a sober study of this epic. It was enough that one hero – depicted as a ploughman – turned out to be wiser and stronger than the other – a prince and a warrior. Any serious study of the bylina became impossible after that; and although the most level-headed folklorists pointed out that the epic does not lend itself to allegory, the temptation to impose an allegorical meaning on the bylina was simply too great. At least the Slavophiles did not draw conclusions from the bylina about the opposition between the heroes, nor did they turn a blind eye to their ultimate cooperation. The socialists went further, completely obscuring the meaning of the bylina with their interpretations. The bylina was transformed into a propaganda poster bearing very little resemblance to the original folklore. Only a few—literally a handful—remained free from this prevailing trend: F.I. Buslaev, and, during the Soviet era, perhaps D.M. Balashov. Twentieth-century scholars, on the whole, remained at the same level of interpretation of the bylina as the authors of the preceding century. The bylina is interpreted in Slavophile terms (the power of the community and its voluntary cooperation with princely authority – Froyanov and Yudin), in Narodnik terms (the glorification of the peasantry – Rybakov) or in socialist terms (a satire on the prince, elevating a representative of the 'working people'– Propp).

Meanwhile, even in the nineteenth century, the information available to scholars would have been sufficient for a radical re-evaluation of this bylina.

Features that prevent Mikula from being perceived as the image of an ordinary, however idealised, ploughman appear right from the start of the bylin. Volga and his retinue spend three days trying to catch up with the 'ploughman', whose 'shouts' they can hear. Balashov, it is true, noted that it is impossible to catch up with a ploughman in three days, if only because he

turns at the end of the furrow, but this objection is not as obvious as it seems, as will be discussed in detail below.

Finally, they catch up with the ‘ploughman’.

This is what he looks like – in the epic, not in the imagination of researchers and illustrators – the ‘hero in a canvas shirt’ (B.A. Rybakov):

> The ploughman’s mare is a
> chestnut, Her harness is of silk,
> The ploughman’s plough beam
> is of maple, The coulters on the
> beam are of damask steel,
> The crossbar’s end-piece is of silver,
> And the crossbar’s horn is a fine red
> gold. And the ploughman’s curls sway,
> Which scatter like pearls whenever he
> gallops; The ploughman’s eyes are as clear
> as a falcon’s,
> And her eyebrows are as black as
> sable; The plough mare’s boots are
> of green morocco leather:
> His heels are as sharp as an awl,
> his toes pointed; A sparrow might
> fly right under his heel, An egg
> could roll right past his nose; The
> dandy wears a down-stuffed hat,
> And his little caftan is of black velvet.

Remember, reader, how we marvelled at this appearance in the introduction? Propp notes that ‘the bards… do not always observe moderation. They are not deterred by the fact that, for example, a sable fur coat does not in any way go with ploughing’. In fact, the velvet caftan and high-heeled boots ‘go with ploughing’ no more than that. As usual, Propp explains the luxury of Mikula’s attire as ‘the love and respect of the people’.

One cannot help but notice Propp’s highly arbitrary interpretations of such details. The description of luxury serves at times as proof of ‘the people’s love and respect’, and at others as a means of satire (‘Duke Stepanovich’).

In fact, such an extraordinary description of Mikula and his ‘tools of the trade’ indicates that we are dealing not merely with a ploughman, and that his occupation is by no means ‘peasant labour’.

In fact, there is a direct reference to this in the epic. Volga, marvelling at Mikula's marvellous ploughing, says:

> I have travelled far and wide,
> But I have never seen such a wonder.
> I have walked as a pike in the blue seas, I have
> prowled as a grey wolf in the dark forests, Yet
> I have not learnt this *wisdom*:
> To plough and till the land, and to be a peasant.

I.Ya. Froyanov and Y.I. Yudin (just as D.M. Balashov had done before them) considered that the epic, or more precisely, the original layer of the epic as reconstructed by them, deals with the Slavs' transition from hunting to agriculture, and with the superiority of the ploughman over the hunter[4].

The interpretation put forward by I.Ya. Froyanov and Yu.I. Yudin sounds somewhat strange. It might have been appropriate in F.I. Buslaev's day. It might have carried weight at the beginning of the 20th century, at a time when G.V. Plekhanov was debating with V.A. Keltuyala, objecting to the latter's assertions 'that until the mid-13th century, hunting was the predominant occupation among us', and arguing that from pagan times the economy of the Eastern Slavs had been based on agriculture. Nowadays, such an explanation cannot be accepted. One of the co-authors writes in another of his books: 'The notion of the Eastern Slavs as a semi-nomadic people engaged chiefly in hunting, fishing, beekeeping and other forest-based trades has long since been consigned to the realm of historiographical legends. (…) The economic base of the Eastern Slavs and the population of Ancient Rus' was founded, first and foremost, on agriculture.' Moreover, the transition to agriculture had already taken place among the ancestors of the Slavs. We find cognate words associated with ploughing among a wide variety of Indo-European peoples; the Slavic 'orat' – to plough – corresponds, for example, to the Sanskrit 'ar', the Greek 'aroo', the Latin 'aro', the Irish 'araim', the Gothic 'arjan' and the Lithuanian 'arti'. This suggests that ploughing originated in Proto-Indo-European. It is doubtful that archaic elements of this calibre could have found their way into the heroic epic of a single nation. Among the Slavic peoples, there is a widespread

a legend concerning the creation of the plough by ‘Ded-Gospod’, that is, the supreme god, or the divine blacksmith, a figure whose origins can be traced back to one of the most ancient deities of the Slavic pantheon – Svarog; finally, the Orthodox saints Cosmas and Damian (that is, one of the pagan gods under a Christian ‘pseudonym’, most likely Svarog himself). The 12th-century Byzantine author Eustathius notes that among the ‘Tavri’ (the Rus’ are referred to as ‘Tavri’ or ‘Tavroscyphs’ in Byzantine literature), Osiris ploughed the earth. It is impossible to ascertain from this account exactly which Russian deity is concealed behind the name of Osiris. It is most likely that the reason for such a strange identification lay precisely in the myth of divine ploughing, since one of Osiris’s attributes was the plough; and in that case, all the other characteristics of the Egyptian god would be of no use in attempting to establish exactly who is referred to by his name in the Byzantine writer’s account. One thing can be concluded with certainty – the myth of the divine ploughman was already known to the Rus’ at that time and, by all accounts, was overtly pagan; otherwise, an Orthodox Byzantine would not have identified his hero with an ancient deity of the Egyptian ‘idol-worshippers’. However, this does not mean that Mikula is a pagan deity, contrary to the views of mythologists and D.M. Balashov. Despite all Mikula’s advantages over Volga, the former nevertheless remains subordinate to the latter. He travels with Volga ‘as a companion’, and Volga appoints him as governor in the conquered cities. Such a scenario would be impossible if Mikula were understood to be a pagan god, especially since Volos is one of the two supreme deities of the Rus’.

Mikula is not a divine ploughman; yet his ploughing may well be connected precisely with the divine, with *imitatio dei*, the imitation of the Gods and Ancestors – a key motif in all human activity within a traditional society. To put it simply, Mikula’s attire – unusual for a ploughman – and the even more unusual appearance of his plough lead one to see him as a man performing a ritual. In other words, his ploughing is not divine, but ritualistic and sacred.

The hero’s ritual ploughing is a widespread motif amongst a number of Indo-European peoples: the Italics, the Hindus, the Greeks and the Franks. According to Herodotus (IV, 5, 7), a sacred golden plough featured in the rituals of the ‘Scythian’ ploughmen, the Scoloti of the Dnieper region, who were most likely a remnant of the pre-Scythian population

on the banks of the Dnieper [5] . Legends of the ploughman-hero are found among the Baltic Finns (Prince Kalevipoeg, whose name clearly derives from the Lithuanian or Latvian ‘kalvis’, – ‘blacksmith’ – and is reminiscent of both the Finnish-Karelian Ilmarinen and the Slavs’ ‘divine blacksmiths’ who ploughed the Serpent – among the Estonians, the blacksmith Ilmarinen – among the Karelians), whilst the miraculous ploughman Tyushchan is chosen as prince in Mordovian tradition. However, there is every reason to believe that these Finno-Ugric legends were borrowed from Indo-European peoples; in the case of the Karelians and Mordvins, specifically from the Slavs. Among the Karelians, even epic tales proper, adopted from the Russians, were widespread (*Dmitrieva, S.N.* *Geographical Distribution…* p. 88), from which, evidently, the themes found their way into Karelian runes: the enemy’s head impaled on a stake within the enclosure of his own courtyard, already crowned with the heads of the hero’s predecessors; the suicide of the outcast warrior Kullervo, who throws himself upon his sword; and, finally, the motif of the sorcerer-smith ploughing the ‘serpent’s field’ with a plough of gold and silver (evidently a reinterpretation of the Slavic blacksmiths’ ‘ploughing on a serpent’). As for the Mordvins, their legends were strongly influenced by their Russian neighbours, particularly the schismatics (*Galkovsky, N.M.*, op. cit., pp. 139–140), and indeed the legend of Tyushtyan’s election as tsar almost verbatim repeats the legend of Przemysl.

It is precisely among the Slavs that the motif of the miraculous ploughman and the magical plough is most widespread. Sometimes historical figures appear in this role – the Russian princes Boris and Gleb, the Bulgarian Prince Marko – but more often these characters are unknown to historiography (which, of course, in no way precludes their having actually existed). These include the Polish prince-ploughman Piast and the Czech prince-ploughman Przemysl, both mentioned by Fyodor Buslaev in connection with the epic tale of Mikula. There is also the Belarusian prince-ploughman Radar. And there are Kirill and Nikita Kozhemyaki from Russian and Ukrainian folktales. In a Western Ukrainian song, King Solomon ploughs with a golden plough. The plough itself was an object of worship – there was a custom of going carolling at Christmas with a plough, honouring it. A similar custom existed in Germany, where they carried and honoured a fiery (that is,
‘golden’) plough. The well-known prohibition against ‘calling out to the plough’ or ‘praising it’, recorded as far back as the 17th century, is evidently linked to such customs. Despite this, the text of the ‘calling out’ – the refrain ‘Oi

Little Plough!'—which accompanies the singing of Christmas carols—has survived (albeit in isolated records) to the present day. The Czech legend of Przemysł, who fed the guests who had come to call upon him to become prince from the ploughshare, echoes the Polish custom of placing a ploughshare on the table at Christmas. Given the original sacred basis of tribute relations, it is significant that tribute was often collected 'from the plough' or 'from the ploughshare' – the latter custom is observed among the Poles and the Polabian Slavs, and was evidently borrowed from them by the Livonians. In Bulgaria, in addition to the custom of depicting a plough on ritual New Year's bread, there was a ritual in which masked performers – 'kukeri' – re-enacted ploughing and sowing. The ploughman was played by a masked 'tsar'.

It is striking that the overwhelming majority of mythologised images of the ploughman are those of leaders and rulers. The ploughing ruler also features in non-Slavic traditions: Ugo among the Franks, Odysseus among the Greeks, Tarchon among the Etruscans, Romulus among the Latins, Janaka among the Hindus, Tyushtyan among the Mordvins, and Kalevipoeg among the Estonians—whose princely or even royal status Soviet commentators tried in every way to portray as a 'convention', whilst against the backdrop of the other magical ploughmen, tsars, kings and princes, it appears rather a natural phenomenon. The Scythian hero who came into possession of the golden plough is also referred to as a king. It is precisely in the ritual of the royal ploughing that the golden plough is mentioned among the Hindus, and the copper one (copper and gold are interchangeable in folklore) among the Italics. Even Ivan the Terrible, in his youth, took part in rituals of pagan origin and, amongst other things, 'ploughed the spring fields with the boyars'.

The character of Mikula also bears many traits of a bylinic chieftain. For instance, the fur coat that so perplexed Propp – as we recall, a bylin-style marker of a ruler or chieftain. Vladimir and King Lyakhovinsky wear sable or ermine fur coats. Churilo and Duke boast of their fur coats; I. Ya. Froyanov and Yu. I. Yudin convincingly interpret them as clan chieftains. Finally, Ilya wears a fur coat, but only in those bylinas where he is portrayed as the recognised leader of a bogatyr retinue ('Three Little Journeys', 'The Falcon-Ship').

None of the other heroes of the bylinas are endowed with this item of clothing – so commonplace for a Russian person. In this connection,

one might recall the custom of crowning the bride and groom in fur coats (in the ceremony, it should be noted, they are referred to as '*prince* and princess').

Mikula's appearance also brings to mind the ideal leader and handsome man – Churila, or Vladimir in the epic about the matchmaking.

What, then, is the essence of Mikula's ritual actions? The ruler's ritual ploughing boiled down to two motifs: either the first furrow, marking the start of the ploughing, or the drawing of a boundary – the establishment of a ritual boundary for the settlement or country, for the land ritually considered 'one's own', separating it from the 'foreign', dangerous world. Thus, the Belarusian prince Radar, having defeated the serpent Krakovey, sent by the hostile King Lyakh, harnesses him to a plough and ploughs the border with Polish territory, whereupon the serpent, now set free, informs his master: 'Oh, Lyash, Lyash, the Bug is ours!' There really are gigantic ramparts along the western Bug, similar to the Trojan ramparts on the Danube or the Serpent Ramparts of Ukraine. The Italics (the Etruscans and Latins) also had a custom of ploughing the boundaries of their settlements with a copper plough, followed by the king, 'from left to right' (presumably clockwise, in the direction of the sun's movement, 'posolon') all the way round. With this method of ploughing, the 'good', right-hand side of the royal ploughman was his own land, whilst the left-hand, 'unfavourable' side was the foreign, external world. In Ukrainian legends, Prince Boris (and his later fairy-tale counterparts – Nikita and Kirill Kozhemyaki) ploughs the land, just like Prince Radar, on a plough drawn by the Serpent. In this scenario, Kyiv remains within the clockwise arc, and to the ploughman's left—in the portion symbolically ceded to the Serpent—lies the steppe, hostile to the Slavs: '… Let us divide the whole earth, the whole world, equally: you shall live in one half, and I in the other.

'Very well,' said Kozhemyaka, 'we must mark out the boundary.

Nikita made a plough weighing three hundred poods, harnessed the Serpent to it, and began to plough the boundary from Kyiv; Nikita ploughed a furrow from Kyiv to the sea…' (Russian Folk Tales. Moscow: Khudozh. Lit., 1976. p. 174.).

The 'opashka' ritual is one of the most colourful Slavic rituals, which has long attracted the attention of ethnographers. It was performed to protect the settlement from the plague. It is also known abroad: 'In the 17th and 18th centuries, in many towns and villages of Lausitz, Serbia, Transylvania, Moldavia and Romania (the regions listed are those inhabited by Slavs, or which were once so. – *L. P.*) there existed… a custom of blocking the path of an epidemic: naked young women (and sometimes young men)

would plough a furrow around the village or dance whilst leaping (cf. Remus's leaps over the furrow ploughed by Romulus to mark the future boundary of Rome. It is quite likely that both these actions and Remus's subsequent execution were part of a ritual sacrifice. Romulus's words, as quoted by Titus Livius: 'So let anyone who leaps over my walls perish!' (Liv. I, 7) constitute one of the most common incantatory formulas. – *L. P.*) 'through this magical circle', reports the French researcher Jacques Delumo. It is true, however, that in the situations described ethnographically, the 'opashka' was performed by women. Perhaps this should be seen as 'a shift towards a female sphere of ritual practice, which had previously been the preserve of men – processes characteristic of the degradation of ritual performance', as ethnographers assert. Be that as it may, the legends concerning ploughing on the Serpent convey the same meaning as the custom of the 'opashka', and the latter is evidently akin to the ritual of founding a settlement practised by the ancient Italic peoples. Here, too, it is worth noting that Volga's retinue spent three days catching up with Mikula. Balashov, as we recall, proposed a different interpretation of the epic narrative on the grounds that a ploughman cannot move constantly in one direction; indeed, he cannot – if he *is ploughing* rather than *harrowing*! In the epic, however, Mikula is, in essence, cutting a single furrow through virgin land, felling trees and huge boulders – a boundary marking his domain, the lands of his clan.

Here we have a chieftain who 'ploughs' out land for his people to live on, shielding them with the rampart and moat of his furrow from the lands of ill-wishing neighbours – those very 'wicked little men, all of them robbers' with whom Mikula has already had an armed clash. Mikula's ploughing is a magical rite, a 'wisdom' akin to that possessed by Volga, and D.M. Balashov is quite right to speak of their encounter as a meeting and contest between two sorcerers and cultural heroes. It should be added – two chieftains!

One of the aspects of the epic that has yet to be satisfactorily explained is the form in which Mikula invariably appears to Volga.

> I'll plough the rye, then stack it in sheaves, I'll
> stack it in sheaves, then haul it home, Haul it
> home, then thresh it at home,

And I'll brew some beer and give the lads a drink,
And then the lads will start calling out to me:
'Young Mikula Selyaninovich!'

The researchers did not explain this point, not because they were unable to do so, but because they did not wish to; because it did not occur to them that there was anything in it to explain. They failed to notice the ambiguity. Only D.M. Balashov, one of the most level-headed and observant researchers of the bylinas (tellingly, he was also virtually the only Soviet researcher of the bylinas who knew the Russian countryside not just from books, and almost the only one who did not believe at all in the peasant origins of the bylinas), sensed a certain inconsistency. Quoting Propp – 'the harvest is a common, folk festival' – Balashov wonders: 'What sort of peasants are these whom Mikula, having single-handedly ploughed and harvested the crop, is supposed to be treating to a drink?'. Balashov finds the answer to this perplexity in his view of Mikula as the inventor of agriculture and brewing, a 'cultural hero'. This answer is untenable, and the reasons for this have already been set out in the assessment of the interpretation of the bylina about Volga and Mikula by I. Ya. Froyanov and Yu. I. Yudin. Agriculture has been known to the Slavs for far too long and too well for such an archaic figure to have survived in their heroic epic. By way of comparison, it is impossible to imagine Agamemnon, or Achilles, or Odysseus encountering Prometheus on their travels; it is even less likely that they would have made the Titan their companion or, say, their governor.

But the question raised by Balashov is by no means the only enigma in Mikula's speech. In this speech, Mikula presents himself as the organiser of the feast. Yet in the bylina—sometimes even in the later, specifically Novgorod bylina about Sadko and Buslay, and always in the Kyiv bylina—the organisation of a feast is the exclusive prerogative of the prince. Let us recall what was said about Vladimir and his role in the distribution of the intoxicating drink, the embodiment of grace. When Ilya organises a feast for the 'tavern-goers', this is regarded as an outright challenge to Vladimir and is accompanied by a promise to 'serve the prince in Kyiv tomorrow'!

In fact, with this statement, Mikula is proclaiming not so much his name as his status. 'I organise feasts' – that is to say, 'I am a prince!'.

However, this is not the final layer of meaning. What catches the eye is, in fact, for whom the feast is actually intended. Mikula intends to treat the 'little men' to beer. Propp, interpreting this intention as a desire to summon Mikula's 'fellow villagers' to the feast, contradicts himself. On the very same pages, he categorically states that 'peasants are not referred to as "mužiki" in the epic'. In other words, when Mikula beats the 'mužiki', they are not peasants, but when he treats them to beer, they are peasants. I fear that with such an approach, there will be far too many peasants.

The concept of 'muzhichki' or 'muzhiki' in the Russian epic still awaits a researcher[6] . However, specifically in this plot, the muzhiki appear everywhere as a hostile force. Mikula hides his plough from the 'peasant villagers', so that they might not 'snatch' the precious metal from the plough. Volga rides out with his retinue to collect 'tribute' from the peasants, and Mikula then joins him. Mikula fought against the 'peasants' who had attacked him – and this battle is described in the very same terms and phrases as the fight against some 'scoundrels':

> 'I've laid a thousand of them low here;
> those who stood are now sitting, and those
> who sat are now lying down.'

And Mikula, who is gathering these 'peasants' together with Volga, intends to plonk them down with a beer.

Our bewilderment dissipates as soon as we recall certain peculiarities of the poetic language of the heroic tales of Ancient Rus':

> For Oleg smithied sedition with his sword
> And *scattered* arrows across the land…
> Then, under Olza, the sons of Gorislav
> *You scattered* and *were torn apart by* internecine strife…
> The black earth beneath the hooves was *strewn with*
> bones, And the *meadow with* blood;
> *They swept* with might across the Rus' lands!
> On Nemiza *sheaves are strewn* their heads, *threshing* with threshing flails,

They lay their bodies on the threshing floor, and their souls are separated from their bodies.
The bloody birch trees were not *sown* in the marsh, *but with* the bones of the sons of Rus'…
There was not enough of that bloody *wine*,
There the brave Rus' men finished *their feast*:
The matchmakers *drank their fill*,
whilst they themselves fell For the
land of Rus'.

M.M. Plisetsky wrote in *The Historicism of Russian Bylinas*: 'The image of war is metaphorised as ploughing with spears, threshing with the body, and sowing with arrows (or bones).'

'The comparison of battle with the harvest is one of the most widespread tropes in Old Russian literature, widely represented in both narrative genres and translated… literature. However, *The Tale* employs not only the simplest likening of battle to harvest and mowing, but also more unconventional images: threshing and winnowing… sowing and sprouting,' writes B. Gasparov in his book *The Poetics of *The Tale of Igor's Campaign***. As we can see in the epic 'Volga and Mikula', the anonymous author of *The Tale* is not as original or 'unconventional' as the researcher supposes.

The spring field had been ploughed,
Not with a plough, nor with a harrow,
But with sharp Murzamet spears,
The field was not harrowed with a harrow,
But with the spirited hooves of horses;
The field was not sown with rye, nor with wheat,
But the spring field was sown by the
Cossacks' headstrong heads, —

as a Ukrainian song goes – as we can see, here too the imagery of ploughing and sowing is used to depict battle.

'Another metaphorical projection that constantly accompanies the description of battles in *The Word* is… a feast – this image is well developed in folklore and Old Russian literature and includes

a whole range of recurring elements: thirst, blood-wine, and intoxication (the comparison of fallen warriors with drunken guests).” (Ibid.) Behind these images lies a specific ritual practice of druzhina—or, more precisely, proto-druzhina—military magic, which has so far been little studied in Russian sources. Its last vestiges can be found in the *Song of the Nibelungs*, where the Burgundian knights drink the blood of the fallen before their final battle, and in one version of the bylina concerning Svyatogor’s transfer of his strength to Ilya Muromets. However, we shall not delve further into this topic here. We shall merely note that the metaphor of the battle-feast, in which enemies appear as honoured guests, is indeed one of the most widespread in the martial poetry of Ancient Rus’. Let us recall, for instance, the reply given to Batu by the captive warriors of Kolovrat: ‘We have been sent by Prince Ingvar Ingorevich of Rezan to honour you, mighty tsar, to treat you with respect and to pay you due honour. Do not be surprised, tsar: we cannot keep up *with filling the cups* for the great power – the Tatar army.’

And here, the Cossack poetry of Mloryssia is not to be outdone:

> Why, my dear child, do you drink yourself so
> full? You bow down to the very ground,
> And clutching at every blade of grass and tuft of feather grass?
> As the brave young man says to his dear mother: ‘It is
> not of my own accord, brave young man, that I drink
> myself drunk,
> It was the Turkish sultan who made me drink three
> drinks, Not just three drinks, but three different
> ones:
> For his first drink was a sharp sabre, And his
> second drink was a well-aimed spear, And
> his third drink was a lead bullet.

Battle-threshing and battle-feasting are not the exclusive preserve of *Russian* druzhina poetry. For instance, Torgils the Fisherman refers to a sword as a ‘chain of steel’, which is practically a direct borrowing from the ‘chains of the haraluzh’ in *The Word*, and to a battle as a ‘feast of the Navii’. In Homer’s *Iliad* (Book XX, lines 495–499):

> Just as when a farmer yoks together strong-jawed oxen, To
> thresh white barley on a threshing floor, round and smooth,
> The furrows made by the bellowing oxen are swiftly worn
> away beneath their feet —

So, under the divine Pelides, the firm-hoofed horses Crushed
corpses, shields and helmets…

As mentioned above, the author of *The Word* is not as distinctive and unique as B.M. Gasparov believes.

Thus, there are three layers to Mikula's speech. The first is deceptively literal: a declaration that he intends to grow and harvest rye, brew beer from it, and organise a feast. The second – by presenting himself as the organiser of the feast, Mikula allegorically conveys his princely dignity. But, as we have seen, he is more likely to be winnowing than ploughing, and no harvest or feast in the literal sense is to be expected. The third meaning is revealed by the final riddles. Mikula's speech turns out to be a grim boast by a warrior threatening his enemies with a bloody 'feast'. In doing so, he reaffirms his true lineage. Mikula, this 'hero in a canvas shirt' (B.A. Rybakov), this 'peasant ideal' (V.Ya. Propp), turns out to be a prince and a warrior. In the epic, the heroes – especially all manner of experts
of 'wisdom', often express themselves through riddles such as these. I do not know whether Volga solved them, but even scholarly folklorists failed to realise that they had been presented with riddles. Thus, it becomes absolutely clear that Volga's encounter with Mikula is by no means a meeting between a prince and a peasant; it is a meeting between two prince-magicians, a 'clash and contest between two heroes – ancestors of different tribes' (D.M. Balashov). The question remains: of which specific tribe or confederation of tribes was Mikula a prince, and whose 'cultural hero' was he? (We have already established Volga-Volkh's tribal affiliation.)

The tribal nature of the legend concerning Volga's encounter with Mikula is also indicated by the fact that, as Balashov points out, it was widespread within a relatively small area, evidently colonised
by the 'descendants' of the ploughman-prince. Unfortunately, it is currently impossible to identify this tribe on the basis of the ethnographic, anthropological or other characteristics of this area. By way of conjecture, I shall venture to put forward a number of observations which seem to point to Mikula's origins. The legend closest to the image of Mikula (the ploughman-prince tilling the boundaries of his land) is the Belarusian legend of Radar. It is curious that in the bylin about Mikula we encounter

the form ‘ratar’, which is extremely close, both phonetically and semantically, to the name of the Belarusian hero. The Belarusians, moreover, are geographically closest to the region where these epics were spread. Given the Novgorod origins of the epics, they were previously even closer to the area where the Russian epic was created. Two tribal confederations – the Dregovichs and the Krivichs – played a part in the formation of the Belarusian ethnic group. But it was the Krivichs who constituted one of the three tribal confederations mentioned in the legend of the summoning of the Varangians. According to archaeological evidence, it was the Krivichs who settled one of the three districts of ancient Novgorod. Kostomarov had already suggested that ‘the Ilmen region had been inhabited since ancient times by Slavs of the Belarusian branch, that is, the Krivichs’, to whom the original names of Lake Ilmen and the Volkhov River – Moiskoye and Mutnaya respectively – mentioned in Novgorod legends belonged. The Volkhov River was named after the heroic leader of the newcomers (though, at the time of colonisation, he may still have been alive), whilst Ilmen, a name all too often explained as deriving from Finno-Ugric languages, was most likely named after the River Ilmenau (a tributary of the Elbe), which flowed through the Obodrite homeland of the Novgorod Slavs. However, the more ancient form of this name – Ilmer – is more likely to correspond to the early medieval name for the Seiderzee bay – Ilmer. Modern archaeology confirms Kostomarov’s hypothesis – the culture of long burial mounds, associated with the origins of the Krivichians, penetrated the north of Eastern Europe very early on.

It therefore seems plausible to regard Mikula as a Krivich hero, and the epic tale of his encounter with the Volga as a legend about the clash in northern Eastern Europe between two waves of colonisation, two methods of settlement – communal, agricultural (‘ploughing up’ the land by Mikula) colonisation of the Krivichians, and the druzhina-based, so to speak, proto-Ushkuynich colonisation of the Varangian ancestors of the Slovenes. Given the earlier penetration of the Krivichians into these lands, on the one hand, and the political supremacy of the Slovenes within the resulting super-alliance of tribes – on the other, there appears to be a very natural element of irony directed at the Slovenian hero-progenitor, which has been preserved in the epic. The encounter was followed by a union, an alliance for joint domination, in particular, over the ‘wicked, robber peasants’ from the local, predominantly hunting, tribes.

The role of the Ilmen Slovenes in the epic tradition is not limited to the three plots outlined above. A whole series of images and plot devices in the epics find parallels only amongst the Baltic Slavs, from whom they could only have been brought to Eastern Europe by Slovenian colonists. As we mentioned above (Part II, Chapter 3), in a number of bylina, Alyosha Popovich and Ilya Muromets cut the body of an opponent slain in single combat into pieces and scatter them across the field. The head, impaled on a spear, is brought to the prince's court. Yet this is precisely what the Obodrites did to Bishop John in the 11th century, except that the head on the spear was carried not to the prince's court, but into the temple of a pagan god.

In the epic about Prince Boris Romanovich—a variant of the epic about Danila Lovchanin—a 'wild boar-like beast' emerges from the 'blue sea' onto an island.

According to the legends of the Baltic Slavs, 'if ever they are threatened by severe hardships… or turmoil, then a great boar with snow-white tusks will emerge from the aforementioned lake (Tollensee. – *L. P.*)' (Thitmar of Merseburg). The epic ends with a bloody battle between the Russian prince-hero and the troops sent against him by Vladimir.

Thus, we see that a careful examination of the bylina and a comparison of them with legends recorded in the 15th–17th centuries, as well as the latest archaeological data, have revealed a number of plots which, with a high degree of probability, can be traced back to the tribal epics of the Ilmen Slavs. Traces of Baltic-Slavic legends and customs in the bylinas of the Kyiv circle compel us to regard them with fresh attention and, perhaps, to reconsider the established dating and geographical attribution of these plots. This circumstance draws attention to the lands from which the ancestors of the Slavs, and subsequently the Varangian Rus', came to Eastern Europe. The latter is of particular interest. For, on the one hand, the heroes of the Kyiv cycle unanimously identify themselves as *Rus'* heroes and their land as *Rus*'. On the other hand, however, let us recall that the custom of headhunting—which is not mentioned by historians in connection with the Slavs of Eastern and Southern Europe—is recorded by the Greeks as a custom *of the Rus'* (and by Latin sources among the Western Slavs). The custom of ritual warrior suicide, likewise never recorded amongst the Slavs of Eastern Europe, is documented by Arab and Greek sources amongst *the Rus'* (and in the *Great Chronicle* amongst the Western

Slavs). The pagan burial described in the bylinas mirrors Ibn Rusta's account of *Rus'* burials (and finds a parallel in the burials of Moravia). The portrayal of Prince Vladimir in the bylinas fully corresponds to Ibn Fadlan's description of the Tsar *of the Rus*'. Moreover, the bylinas also reflect the appearance of the ancient Rus': there is a curious episode in the Russian bylinas. Dobrynya Nikitich, after long wanderings, returns to his mother's home, where he is already presumed dead. When he identifies himself, he hears in reply:

> Young Dobrynya Nikitich had golden curls: they coiled in three rows round the crown of his head (the top of his head? – *L. P.*). But yours, you tavern bum, hang down to your shoulders!

This reminds us of the hairstyle of the ancient Rus' people – a shaved beard (Fyodor Buslaev notes that most of the epic heroes are beardless) and a forelock on the crown of the head. The 'three rows' into which Dobrynya's curls were wound around the crown of his head are reminiscent of the tufts worn by the most skilled Zaporozhian warriors, who wound their hair round their heads three times (as reported by A.V. Zhuravlev, a staff member of the National Academy of Public Administration of Ukraine). Dobrynya, who had let himself go and allowed his hair to grow long, was literally unrecognisable even to his own mother! In some bylinas, Ilya Muravlenin, before setting off on his exploits, draws 'signs' on his palms – might this be a reference to the tattoos with which the Rus' people, as described by Ibn Fadlan, covered their hands? Thus, whilst the matrimonial themes in the bylinas allow us to speak of them as the epic of a tribe in the process of formation—as was noted when considering the views of V. Ya. Propp, I. Ya. Froyanov and Y.I. Yudin in the first chapter, then the most ancient features of the way of life and customs they depict allow us to assert that this tribe was indeed the Rus', in the sense and capacity in which they arrived in Eastern Europe in the 9th–10th centuries, and, as Normanists are fond of pointing out, were 'distinguished' from the Slavs by the sources. In reality, such 'separation' is of little significance. Tacitus, Jordanes and Procopius of Caesarea also distinguish the Goths from the Germanic peoples. No one has ever referred to the Britons as Celts or Gauls. However, none of this in any way refutes either the Germanic origin of the Goths or the Celtic origin of the Britons, and it is only Slavicists who demand that

medieval authors to use an academic, generalising term when referring to the peoples they studied. The only thing that follows from the ‘separation’ of the Rus’ is that in Eastern Europe they were outsiders and newcomers, distinct from the *local* Slavic tribes.

And just as the Novgorod chronicle traditions served as a guide in our search for remnants of the tribal epic of the Ilmen Slavs in the bylina, so too can the epic works of Central Europe—which echo the bylina—serve as a guide in the search for the historical underpinnings of archaic elements in the Kyiv bylina, including the
‘The Saga of Tidrek’.

Chapter 5
Russian Bogatyrs against Attila: Bylinas and the Epic Tradition of Central Europe

Scholars have for some time now drawn attention to the parallels between the Russian byliny and certain epic works from Central Europe dating from the 11th to the 13th centuries: the *Tidrek Saga* and the South German poems about Ortnite or Gertnite. The plot of these works can be summarised very briefly as follows: the saga recounts a war waged by a coalition of the Rus' (led by 'King Valdemar' and his companion Ilya the Rus'), the Vilts (giants and Lutians) and the Pulins (Poles) against Attila's Huns and the Goths of Thidrek (Theodoric). The German poems recount how Ilya helps his young nephew Ortnit (Gertnit, Erno) win the hand of his bride, the daughter of a pagan king. In retaliation, the king sends a dragon to attack Gertnit. Gertnit, despite the warnings of his wife and Ilya, goes into battle with the monster and is slain. In some versions, the backstory (the wedding, the scheming father-in-law) is omitted. Gertnit engages in battle with the dragon despite the warnings of his loved ones and is slain. His lands pass to Dietrich – that is, the same Tidrek-Theodoric (the text and retellings of the legends can be found in the works by A.N. Veselovsky listed below).

The question of the connection between the bylinas and Western epic poetry was first raised by the German scholar K. Müllenhoff in the mid-19th century.

'Waldemar, King of the Rus' and his warrior 'Ilias von Rüssen', that is, Ilya the Russian, bore a striking resemblance to the central figures of the Russian bylin epic: Vladimir the Red Sun and Ilya Muromets. To the German scholar's credit, he posited precisely a Russian origin for these figures from the Scand-Germanic epics. Among Russian scholars, A.N. Veselovsky, a universally recognised leading figure of the comparative studies school, was the first to examine the parallels between Western epics and the bylinas. On the one hand, he studied the issue very carefully and established that not only individual heroes, but also the connections between them and entire genealogies in the bylinas and Western epics coincide. On the other hand, all subsequent research into references to heroes from Russian bylinas in Western epics was conducted

specifically within the framework of the ‘borrowing’ school. It was taken for granted that the appearance of Russian heroes in Western epics reflected not historical reality, but the mutual influence of the folklore of different peoples.

B.I. Yarkho conclusively proved that this was not a matter of a coincidental similarity of names, but of the heroes being one and the same. He identified the following similarities between the bylin bogatyr and the ‘Russian’ hero of Western epics: a) similarity in name; b) in geographical and cyclical context; c) in physical appearance; d) in the plot involving a battle between father and son. The researcher noted: ‘Strong arguments are needed to deny the original identity in the face of such similarities.’ This list can be expanded, which we shall do below.

In the 1950s, A.M. Astakhova, in her article ‘Ilya Muromets in the Russian Epic’, drew on material from Western legends. However, her conclusion is disappointing: ‘The material from the sagas provides no grounds for assuming that Ilya entered the Western epic directly from historical reality’, and, furthermore, ‘Nor does the evidence from the sagas in any way resolve the question of Ilya Muromets’ historical prototype.’ This assertion can only be described, at the very least, as controversial. However, it reflects the approach of virtually all researchers who have turned to the *Tidrek Saga* and the German poems about Gertnith.

I.E. Kleinenberg briefly touched upon the bylin theme in his article ‘Dedrik of Bern in the Novgorod Chronicle’. He paints a rather contrived picture: first, the Novgorod bylinas become known to the Germans, who then introduce Ilya and other bylin heroes into their epic, for some reason as enemies of their national hero, Dietrich-Tidrek. Then, in turn, the ‘Tidrek Saga’ became known in Rus’, and its title character, portrayed as an enemy of the Russian bogatyrs, was given the name ‘the wicked, pagan Dedrik’ in the Novgorod Chronicle at the beginning of the 13th century (in the account of the Crusaders’ capture of Constantinople in 1204). Naturally, such an approach rules out any notion of the historical possibility of a real clash between Theodoric and the Russian heroes. Moreover, Theodoric-Dietrich-Tidrek himself is ‘not a historical figure, but (! – *L. P.*) a hero of the epic’ and ‘has lost all connection (!!! – *L. P.*) with his historical prototype’.

The chronicle's mention of Tidrek-Dietrich will be discussed in detail below. For now, let us note that Kleinenberg's arguments are either rather weak or entirely lacking. The former include his account of the strange fate of German and Russian epic heroes. All that Kleinenberg can really say on this matter is to point to the very close trade relations between the Germans and Novgorod in the 12th–13th centuries. However, trade relations by no means imply a mutual influence of cultures, let alone of epic traditions. And, most importantly, one thing remains unclear: if relations between the people of Novgorod and the Hanseatic Germans were so close and amicable, why then does the Russian bogatyr in Germanic and Scandinavian legends become the enemy of their principal hero, whilst the German hero has such a dismal reputation in Rus'?

The second type—claims that are entirely unsubstantiated—includes the assertion that the theme of the war waged by Thidrek, an ally of Attila, against the Rus', the Viltins (Lutichs) and the Pulins (Poles) is supposedly a 'highly distorted reflection' of the infamous Drang nach Osten, the 'Drive to the East' of the Saxon dynasty in the 9th–10th centuries. The researcher provides not the slightest basis for such a categorical judgement. It should be noted, however, that the Germanic peoples always advanced into the lands of the Polabian and Pomeranian Slavs under the pretext of converting the latter to Christianity. In the epic, however, there is not a word about any religious underpinning to the hostility between the Rus', the Viltians and the Pulins, on the one hand, and the Huns and the Goths, on the other. Moreover, the prologue to the saga states: 'There was no one who held the true faith, although they believed in the true God, swore by His name and glorified Him.' In other words, the narrator sees no difference in religious belief between the heroes – they are all, so to speak, 'righteous pagans' – including Tidrek, his ally Attila, and Ilya and Valdemar. No less strange is the alliance between the Lyutichs and the Poles against the Germanic Goths in the saga. In the historical reality of those times, there were indeed alliances between the Poles and the Germans against the Lyutichs, and between the Lyutichs and the Germans against the Poles, but an alliance between the Poles, the Rus' and the Lyutichs against the Germanic peoples is an implausible notion for the 9th–10th centuries. Finally, the absence from the saga of the very ethnonym 'Lutici'—which appeared in the 10th century and quickly supplanted the tribe's former name (Vele, Velt,

Viltins), which had been in use since the 2nd century CE and first appeared on Ptolemy's map.

And this work, as can be seen, is written in the tradition of comparativism. The historical basis of the legends is dismissed from the outset.

The next notable publication on this subject was Glazyrina's article 'Ilya Muromets in Russian Bylinas, a German Poem and a Scandinavian Saga'. It is highly indicative of the entire study of this subject that the article, published in the collection
'Methods of Studying *the* Earliest *Sources on the History* (my emphasis – *L. P.*) of the USSR', yet the author refuses to regard the bylina, the poem and the saga as historical sources in their own right. Glazyrina sees the penetration of images from the Russian bylin epic into the West as merely a case of mutual influence between epics. The sole historical value of this fact, in the researcher's view, lies in the fact that it allows the bylins about Ilya to be dated to a time 'no later than the mid-11th century'.

Apart from the 'similarities' identified by Yarkho, Glazyrina also finds differences in the portrayal of Ilya in the bylina and in Western epics. These differences lie in the fact that Ilya in the bylina is a peasant, whereas in Western legends he is 'kunek Ilias' (King Ilya), 'kunek von Riuzen' (King of Rus'), and 'kunek von wilden Riuzen' (King of Wild Rus'). Furthermore, in the poem *Ortnit*, Ilya commands an army of 5,000 warriors, whereas in the bylina he always performs his feats alone. Finally, the Western Ilya is married and has children, whereas the Ilya of the bylinas is solitary; at most, there is mention of a casual affair with some 'peasant girl' or 'honourable widow', and the children from such unions are hostile towards their father and seek to destroy him.

However, Ilya's peasant origins, as I have already pointed out, are regarded by many researchers of the epic as an element introduced in the 15th–
17th centuries, a point also mentioned by Glazyrina herself. In the bylina, however, there are also a number of hints at Ilya's noble origins: to the townspeople liberated from the 'pagan forces' besieging Chernigov, he appears as a 'prince'; in a number of bylina, his son is referred to as a prince; and in one of the fairy tales based on the bylina, Ilya 'began to reign' (the latter, however, can be explained by the nature of fairy tales; the matter is far more complex when it comes to the 'royal' status of the bogatyr and his son in the bylinas).

In a number of bylinas, Ilya appears not only as a lone warrior but also as a commander leading the actions of the bogatyr's 'brave retinue', as we discussed in the introduction. However, we have already discussed Ilya's role as a retinue commander in the section devoted to Vladimir Krasnoe Solnyshko.

Apart from Ilya's lovers—who may turn out to be an unnamed widow, Baba Zlatogorka or Latygorka, the 'wicked, fair-haired maiden' or even the witch Marinka Kaidalovna—one of the bylinas explicitly mentions *the* bogatyr's *wife*, a certain 'Savishna' (possibly a shortened form of Zlatogorka's patronymic – Severianishna), who, in her husband's absence and clad in his armour, repels the enemy army.

There is another relative of Ilya in the bylina who finds a surprisingly close parallel in Western epic poetry. This is the nephew—in various versions, of either Ilya or Vladimir—the young bogatyr Ermak. 'The name Ermak is entirely consistent across all the bylina and is never replaced by any other names. We may assume that it derives from the historical Ermak. But that is the extent of the historical basis for the epic Ermak,' writes V. Ya. Propp. It would be more accurate to say that this (similarity of name) is the extent of his connection with the conqueror of Siberia. The latter appears in Russian folklore as a seasoned ataman and military commander, and in legends also as a sorcerer. He is credited with participating in the capture of Kazan, as well as with reinforcing the Cossack army, when outnumbered by the enemy, with 'shishigi' – marsh and forest spirits. The epic Ermak is a completely different person. He is a hot-headed youth who commands no one and, in most versions of the epics dedicated to him, perishes in battle against an enemy whose strength he underestimated and against whom he had been warned by his experienced elder relatives – Ilya and Vladimir. Another argument against the later 'introduction' of Ermak into the epic narrative is his connection to a completely separate storyline; on this point, one must agree with V. Kalugin: 'We have every reason to suppose that the bogatyr Ermak originally existed in the Russian epic and that only later – due to the similarity of names – was he associated with Ermak Timofeevich, the conqueror of Siberia.' It is far more difficult to agree with Kalugin's view, which, citing S.N. Azbelev, asserts that the name 'Yermak' derives from the name 'Yermolai', and that the epic itself dates back to

the legend of ‘the Cossack Ermachka’, who fell in the Battle of the Vozha. Here, in turn, I.Y. Froyanov and Y.I. Yudin are correct in asserting that ‘in this instance, one can only acknowledge the independence and lack of connection between the plots of the legend and the bylina’. The only value of the tale of Ermachka for the study of the bylina about Ermak lies in the fact that it indicates that there was more than one Ermak in Rus’ – and in Russian folklore. The conqueror of Siberia,
‘the Cossack Ermachok’ and the bylinic Ermak are three entirely different characters. Nor is it possible to agree with the identification of the names Ermak and Ermolai. The fact is that the Western epic mentions a nephew of both Ilya the Russian and ‘King Valdemar’, a young hero who, against the advice of his loved ones, engages in battle with a dragon and perishes in that fight. This is Ortnit, or Gertnit the Younger, also known as
‘the Russian Count Erno’. As we can see, the hero’s family ties, his age and the cause of his death – overestimating his own strength – all coincide. The name is also similar, particularly in the latter variant. An intermediate variant between the names Erno and Ermak could be the European barbarian name from the time of the Great Migration, Ernak (or Ernak). The transition from ‘m’ to ‘n’ is one of the most obvious (Nikita–Mikita, Nikola–Mykola, Mefodiy–Nefed, Melidiy–Nelid, Mechvolod–Nechvolod), so that Ermak and Ernak are practically the same name. The only significant difference between the young warrior of our epic and the young knight of German poems lies in the nature of the enemy. In the epics recorded in the 19th century, it is the ‘Tatars’ of Tsar Kalina; in the Western epics recorded in the 11th–
13th centuries – a dragon (incidentally, in one version, sent by a hostile tsar). V. Ya. Propp and N. A. Krinichnaya believed that the human adversary replaces and supplants the monster adversary, most often a serpent. In the legends about Gertnit, Erno and Ermak, we see this process clearly. Here we find both a serpent in its own right and a serpent sent by a foreign king (a similar situation is reflected in Belarusian legends – recall the serpent Krakovey, who was incited against the Belarusians by King Lyakh and defeated by Prince Radar), and, finally, in the very latest records of the legend, the enemy king himself at the head of his
‘pagan forces’.

It can be stated with certainty that the epic of Ermak already existed in the early Middle Ages, ‘before the mid-11th century’, in the words of G.V. Glazyrina. And the derivation of this name from the Greek Hermolaus seems more than doubtful in light of the phonetically similar

name ‘Ernak’, recorded by Jordan precisely in the era to which the *Tidrek Saga* attributes the lives of Ilya the Russian, ‘Valdemar, King of the Rus’’, and their young nephew.

Finally, another parallel is the figure of Ilya’s daughter, who was born and raised in the ‘land of Talyan’ and travelled from there to Rus’. The ‘Saga of Tidrek’ also mentions Ilya’s daughter, who finds herself in Verona, that is, in Italy. This parallel has been noted by A.N. Veselovsky, G.V. Glazyrina, A.G. Kuzmin and S.N. Azbelev.

The work of the latter, who devoted considerable space to the interrelationship

between the *Tidrek Saga* and the bylinas, was discussed in detail in the first part of this study.

As we can see, there are far more similarities between the Western and Russian epic depictions of Ilya than B.I. Yarkho had assumed. The differences,

‘identified’ by Glazyrina, turn out to be illusory.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the *Tidrek Saga* was mentioned in two popular works. A.Yu. Karpov, a biographer of Vladimir the Baptist, cites it as an example of his hero’s popularity, having no doubt whatsoever that it was precisely this saga that turned him back into a pagan and made him ‘a contemporary… of Theodoric and the even earlier renowned ruler of the Huns, Attila’.

Another historian, A.S. Korolev, is also highly sceptical about the saga’s historical accuracy (although he does use it in his own arguments). ‘As we can see, the work confuses peoples from different eras – Attila is laying siege to Smolensk!’ he remarks, not without irony.

The fact that the epic figure of Vladimir bears no relation to Vladimir the Baptist has already been explained in detail above. It is quite evident that he is closely related to ‘Valdemar’ from the *Tidrek Saga*. Moreover, Korolev’s irony is far from as apt as it might seem.

However, it is precisely this irony that sheds light on the reasons for the indifference of historians and researchers of the epic towards the information in the *Tidrek Saga*. It transported the heroes of the Russian epic, and Rus’ itself, too far back into the mists of time – to a depth unaccustomed to scholars who are used to regarding even Rurik and Oleg as figures of dubious authenticity, and almost – horror of horrors! – as folklore.

Yet even the explanations offered by comparatists regarding the mutual influence of epics do not resolve all the issues by any means. For instance, it remains unclear why the Germans—and even more so the Scandinavians—suddenly introduced Russian bylin heroes into their own epics.

Why, for instance, did they not include Charlemagne's paladins – Roland and the others – who, after all, lived a whole century closer to the era of Thidrek and Attila (if one accepts the thesis of Karpov and others regarding Vladimir the Baptist as the prototype for Valdemar in the *Thidrek Saga*)? The only Western European hero to feature in the saga – Arthur – is incorporated into it very skilfully. That is to say, he is by no means directly involved in the saga's plot (although what could be more tempting to 'borrow' than the exploits of the Knights of his Round Table?). Furthermore, the historical Arthur was, in fact, an older contemporary of Tidrek of Bern. And although he is scarcely familiar as a character within the saga tradition (in fact, this seems to be the only saga that mentions Arthur), his historical dating is, on the whole, unquestionable – despite the fact that there was no direct written tradition in 13th-century Britain, which had undergone Anglo-Saxon and Norman conquests, dating back to Arthur's time. At the same time, the authors of the saga, who, according to Kleinenberg and Glazyrina, were in direct contact with people from Rus', where the written tradition of John the Baptist's time had continued uninterrupted, and must have had a perfectly clear understanding of the period that had elapsed from his time to the 13th century, suddenly transport 'Valdemar of Holmgard'—the first prince of Kievan Rus' known to the sagas, with whom they were thoroughly familiar—a full half-millennium into the past. Such a combination of historical accuracy with a lack of knowledge regarding what ought to be common knowledge is logically inexplicable. It is also inexplicable from a psychological point of view – as already mentioned, the adventures of Parzival and Lancelot, with whom the German minnesingers were thoroughly familiar (and who, incidentally, made a considerable contribution to Arthurian legend), constituted a far more tempting subject for borrowing than the Russian bylina. Incidentally, it is worth noting that by the 13th century, the legends of Tiderik had already passed from the druzhina culture into the grassroots peasant culture: 'Tiderik of Bern, of whom the peasants had long sung'. Curiously, what could the peasants of Germany possibly have known about King Arthur or Prince Vladimir? One answer suggests itself: if, as early as the 13th century, German peasants were singing legends mentioning the rulers of Britain and Rus', then these legends must have been composed earlier – *much* earlier.

Despite all Kleinenberg's efforts, the appearance in the First Novgorod Chronicle of a passing reference in

the early 13th century of the town of Bern, ‘where the wicked pagan Dedrik was’. I leave it to linguists to judge the validity of deriving the form ‘Dedrik’ from ‘Tidrek’. In the German legends about Dietrich themselves, there is not a word about his enmity with Ilya and Vladimir; consequently, there is no basis for the harsh epithets with which the Novgorod Chronicle endowed the German hero. Nor are Kleinenberg’s depictions of the exchange of heroes between Russian and German epics—with the transformation of a foreign hero into an enemy—convincing. They are unconvincing simply because world history has never known anything of the sort. The centuries-old enmity between Armenians and Azerbaijanis did not cause ‘Father Korkut’ to appear as a villain in *Sasna Tsrer*, nor did David of Sasun become, because of it, an adversary of the positive heroes of *Kitabi Dadam Korkut*. When borrowing does occur, however, it merely speaks to the hero’s incredible popularity, which precludes any negative assessment of his deeds, even amongst his enemies. Thus, the conqueror Alexander the Great (Iskander) becomes the subject of enthusiastic praise within the territory of the Achaemenid Empire he had destroyed, whilst Arthur, who was glorified for slaughtering the Anglo-Saxons in monstrous numbers, becomes one of the symbols of Anglo-Saxon civilisation. Such a discrepancy in the assessment of an epic hero occurs in only one instance – when the same *historical* figure is portrayed differently in the epic traditions of his descendants, the descendants of his allies, and the descendants of his enemies. A typical example is Attila, remembered by the Scandinavian kinsmen of his enemy, the Goths, as the ferocious and treacherous king Atli of the *Volsung Saga* and the heroic poems of the *Elder Edda*. The South German epic, however, transforms this same ‘Scourge of God’ into the kind, soft-hearted and almost weak-willed King Etzel. Need it be explained that the *Song of the Nibelungs* originated amongst the descendants of the Germanic tribes that formed part of Attila-Etzel’s realm?

It is curious that A.S. Khomyakov, one of the first to draw attention to the phrase from the Novgorod Chronicle, also reports on an original tradition regarding the attitude towards Tidrek-Dietrich in the lands along the Oder (that is, precisely in the lands of Vilkinaland from the ‘Tidrek Saga’, in the regions of the Germanised descendants of the Viltians and Lutici). There, the ideal hero of the Scand-Germanic epic becomes the leader of the Wild Hunt of the damned souls (das wilde Heer, *Detrich* [! It seems this is much

closer to the Novgorod form than the northern Tidrek. – *L. P.*] der wilde Tager), …and this conception is entirely local: for in the rest of Germany the wild hunter is not known by the name of Dietrich'.

In the observation in question, Khomyakov refers to the Novgorod 'of the same blood as all the Wends'; in his day, such a statement might have been regarded as conjecture, as the enthusiasm of a Slavophile. Even Ilovaisky did not entertain the idea that the Novgorod Slavs were Wendish colonists. Today this is not a 'conjecture', nor even a 'theory', but an indisputable scientific fact, confirmed by every conceivable means – linguistic, archaeological and anthropological. To deny or ignore it is possible only by disregarding direct evidence from sources, material facts and logic, and can be based, at best, on banal conservatism and a reluctance to part with familiar frameworks.

'Wretched and wicked' is a typical epic epithet (cf. 'the wretched and wicked Tsar Kalin'). And the appearance of the phrase 'the wretched, wicked Dedrik' points to the existence of a Slavic epic tradition, shared by the Russians and the Viltians, in which Dedrik-Tidrek was an anti-hero (cf. Deder – unclean, devil. // *Dal, V.M.* Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language. The word may have been formed from 'Dedrik', with the last two letters interpreted as a diminutive suffix – just as, in its time, the word 'zont' was formed from 'umbrella' (from the Dutch 'zondek'), and the existence of epic traditions concerning the Great Migration in Novgorod—that is, in a land where bylinas have been preserved. This is the only way to explain the phrase from the Novgorod Chronicle.

Furthermore, the geography of Rus' in the *Tidrek Saga* is somewhat surprising. What is most surprising about it is that it is more characteristic of Scandinavian sagas than of bylinas. Of course, Smolensk – or, more precisely, Smolyagin – is mentioned in the bylinas, but quite rarely. Polotsk is completely absent from them. As for Novgorod, it is not mentioned at all in the bylinas of the Vladimir cycle. In the saga, however, the main cities of Rus' are Smalisku, Kiu ok Palltaeskiu, Smalunzkiu oc Pulltiskiu, and the capital is Holmgard or Nogard. Kyiv is barely mentioned, whilst Chernihiv – so popular in the bylinas – is completely absent. Put simply, the 'Russian' place-names in the saga are those of northern Rus' during the Viking Age, not those of the bylinas. And such changes could have occurred

only if the saga was in circulation before the start of the Viking Age. Otherwise, the epic's place names would have found their way into the saga alongside the heroes.

However, the geography of Rus' in the saga and its place-names are not one and the same. Whilst the names of the towns point us towards Eastern Europe, the heroes of the saga travel through Central Europe. Rus' turns out to be the closest neighbour to Attila's Pannonian domains (Gunaland), Northern Italy, and, on the other side, Poland (Pulinaland) and the lands of the Lutici-Vilkins (Viltinaland). The saga's geographical prologue explicitly situates Rus' between Swabia, Hungary (Gunaland) and the lands of the Polabian Slavs, including the Lutici – Windland: 'This saga begins in Apulia and proceeds northwards through Lombardy and Venice to Swabia, Hungary, *Rus'*, Windland, Denmark and Sweden'.

Could the Germans or Scandinavians, who were in constant contact with the people of Novgorod, have been *so* mistaken about the geographical location of Rus'? Obviously not.

Most strikingly, this geographical arrangement of Rus' is also reflected in the bylina.

Chapter 6
The Dnieper, the Euphrates and the Danube: three layers of epic geography

In the epic geography of Rus' (referring to the epics of the Kyiv cycle), there are, as it were, three layers. The first, the most obvious and the one examined by most researchers, is the geography of the well-known Kyiv Rus' of the 9th–10th centuries. This comprises Kyiv, Chernihiv, Smolensk, Rostov, Murom and Suzdal. Admittedly, the last three cities are merely mentioned, whilst Smolensk, in the form of Smolyagin, replaces Chernihiv without causing any particular harm to the plot. Chernihiv itself is somewhat indistinct. At times it appears as a twin city inseparable from Kyiv ('Kyiv to all, Chernihiv'), whilst at others it is portrayed as a politically self-sufficient city, and even, to some extent, one in opposition to Kyiv. In a number of versions, the rulers of Chernihiv are named as Stavr, who was imprisoned by Vladimir 'in the deepest dungeons', and Danila Lovchanin, who was destroyed by the same Vladimir. The 'Prince of Chernihiv' at the Kyiv feast, when a conflict arises between the people of Kyiv and a stranger (Alyosha in the epic 'Alyosha Popovich and Tugarin Zmeevich', Duke Stepanovich in the eponymous epic, or Ivan, the guest's son, in the eponymous epic), invariably sides with the latter. Finally, the last portrayal of Chernihiv is that of a foreign city—barely even Russian—ruled by a prince, a tsar, or even
'King (!) of Chernigov' ('Ivan Godinovich'). The 'peasants of Chernigov' sometimes call upon Ilya Muravlenin to ascend the princely throne, apparently not regarding themselves as subjects of Vladimir at all.

There are also, albeit rather vague, references to the Horde and Lithuania, which have almost become generic names for a foreign country or even simply a country or region ('what Horde are you talking about, and what Lithuania?').

This layer of toponymy may be termed *historical*, or *Eastern European*. Its existence is easily explained by the prevalence of the epic in the Russian state during the 10th century and subsequent centuries; however, the uncertain handling of city names suggests that this is not a matter of the epic's formation, but rather of its prevalence within these historical conditions.

The second layer consists of names of Biblical origin: the land of Zadonsk (Sidon), the mountains of Ararat or even Arabia, Mount Tabor, the land of Canaan, the river Ofrak or Safat (Euphrates), the Babylonian guests, and so on. The origin of these place names is also fairly easy to explain. It should not be forgotten that bylinas were regarded as a gift from God; that, unlike ordinary songs, it was not a sin to sing them even during Great Lent, and in some places they were performed exclusively on 'holy days', when they were to be regarded on a par with the words of church services. A.M. Kryukova's stern decree – 'cursed be he who dares to add or subtract anything from the content of the ancient tales' – is strikingly reminiscent of the biblical commandments: 'Do not add to what I tell you, nor take away from it' (Deut. 4:2), 'Take care to do everything I command you; do not add to it or take away from it' (Deut. 12:32), and, finally, 'And I also testify to everyone who hears the words of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will inflict on him the plagues described in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of this book of prophecy, God will take away his share in the Book of Life and in the holy city, and in the things described in this book' (Rev. 22:18–19). The words of Revelation were undoubtedly known amongst the Old Believers of the Russian North, with their keen focus on apocalyptic themes. On the other hand, imperatives regarding the storyteller's relationship to the epic text, almost verbatim, are reflected in Buryat traditions, where it is difficult to imagine any biblical influence. However, regardless of the origin of A.M. Kryukova's words, it is evident that the texts of the bylinas were regarded in the North as sacred; at the same time, for at least the last few centuries, 'sacred' for Russian peasants—especially in the North, amongst the Old Believers—meant
'biblical'. In this context, biblical legends – either directly or, more likely, through the medium of spiritual verse – and Russian bylina were perceived as equivalent in terms of both divine origin and sacred significance. And those very same Old Believer storytellers, in defiance of the strict prohibition they themselves had proclaimed, thoughtlessly 'added' to the epic the names of rivers, mountains, lands and cities from the 'Holy Scriptures' and Christian legends. It is important to remember that for them this was entirely natural.

In their eyes, the texts of bylinas and spiritual verses on biblical themes were of the same nature, reflecting events of the same order taking place within a single sacred-epic space-time. Biblical names in the bylina are akin to Orthodox crosses, which were carved onto boulders venerated since ancient times by the baptised descendants of pagans who continued this veneration. This layer of bylinic toponymy may be termed *sacred* or *biblical*.

However, apart from these two layers of place names, there is a third, which is not so obvious and which fits into a coherent, consistent system. First and foremost, this applies to other lands – in cases where their names have not yet been overshadowed by the later terms 'Horde', 'Lithuania',
'the Kingdom of Zadonsk' or 'the Land of Canaan'. Yet the picture that emerges is astonishing. Russian bogatyrs travel quite freely to the lands of Lyakhovets or Pomorye (sometimes referred to as the 'Kingdom of Pomorye' with its 'capital city' (Byliny. 1998. p. 41). It is quite clear that this does not refer to the Pomorye native to the bards—which was never an independent country—but to the West Slavic tribal confederation of the Pomorians (Niederle, L. Slavic Antiquities. pp. 124–126). This is particularly evident in the ethnonymic bylinic toponym 'the land of the Pomorians', or 'the Kingdom of the Pomorians'. Guests from the Land of Lyakhovets (the same Stavr in a number of variants) are comfortably attending Prince Vladimir's feast. In the Land of Lyakhovets (or, again, the Land of the Pomorians), Vladimir, Dunay, Dobrynya and Svyatogor find their brides. Moreover, in the epic 'The Prince's Sons from Kryakov' (Kryakov – Kraków on the Upper Vistula, as confirmed by the texts of other epics, where Kryakov is the capital of the Lyakhovets Land), the Polish prince is called a 'Holy Russian hero'; he himself intends to journey 'to the glorious city of Kyiv, to the gracious Prince Vladimir' and says that 'I have heard… I shall speak in Holy Rus'.

On the other hand, Ilya Muromets, as we have already seen, 'served the King of Talian for three years'. He also defends Kyiv, stationed at a outpost
'in the Tsitsarsk steppes', that is, the Austrian steppes, and travels 'along the Latin road'. 'Ilya Muromets rides to the Latin lands to buy horses ['Latin' is a constant epithet for a bogatyr's horse in the bylina. – *L. P.*], there is a bogatyr outpost on the Latin road, led by Ilya Muromets; on this road Ilya Muromets meets the beggar Ivanishch [on the road to Tsargrad. – *L. P.*], and he travels along it in three

little caravans' (Plisetsky, M. M. *Historicism in Russian Bylinas*). These 'Latin roads' are intriguing – could the famous Roman roads be what is meant here?

And yet, in the epic, Volhynia and Podolia are depicted as some sort of far-off fairy-tale realm with distinct features of another world (which is not the case with any of the Central European countries listed). Alongside Podolia, or in its place, the 'Kingdom of Bukhara' sometimes appears, ruled by the 'King of Bukhara' or the 'Bukhar-Tsar'. As M.M. Plisetsky has convincingly demonstrated, this place-name refers to a Slavic region west of the Carpathians, mentioned in Hungarian documents in the 11th century. However, the bylinas make no mention whatsoever of Hungarians, Ugrians or Magyars, and the 'Kingdom of Bukhara'—that is, the 'Kingdom of Bihar'—is always portrayed as a power independent of any other. Thus, we must be referring to a period no later than the end of the 9th or the beginning of the 10th century, when the Hungarians settled on the Danube – yet another milestone pointing to pre-chronicle antiquity.

All this compels us to pay even closer attention to the accounts that, in the bylina, the 'Danube sometimes flows beneath Kyiv', that Duke Stepanovich sails down the Danube towards Kyiv, that Ilya Muromets throws 'stumps and roots' from his father's field into the Danube, and that the daughter of Solov'i the Robber turns out to be a ferrywoman on the Danube. Taken in isolation, such facts might be attributed to 'the role of the Danube in folklore as a generic name for a river', but taken together and within the context of the entire third layer of epic toponymy, they take on a quite special significance. All the more reason not to ignore the epic tale of *the Danube's* birth from the blood of a warrior who was slain *near Kyiv*. Naturally, a city from which it is easier to travel to Kraków or
'Talyan Land' than to Volhynia may well be situated on the Danube. The Bulgarian researcher N.P. Kovachev counted more than seventy places named Kiev, Kiyev, Kiyevtsi, Kiyevichi, Kiyevishch – and so on and so forth – in the lands of the Southern, Western and Eastern Slavs. Many of them were situated precisely on the Danube.

In this connection, attention must be drawn to the long-noted original form of Ilya's nickname – Muravlenin (Filon Kmit of Chernobyl), Morovlin (Erich Lasotta), Murovets, Muravich and so on. B.M. Sokolov, one of the first to note this fact, followed by B.A. Rybakov, suggested that Ilya originated from Moroviysk on the Desna. However, firstly, in such

case, it would be impossible to explain the route to Kyiv via Chernihiv, as Moroviysk itself was situated between Kyiv and Chernihiv. Secondly, as Ilovaisky noted, Moroviysk itself is referred to as Muromsk in medieval documents and is, in all likelihood, precisely the fortress built by Vladimir Svyatoslavich to defend against the Pechenegs and manned by a garrison from Muroma. The chronicle makes no mention of garrisons from Muroma, but they may be concealed either under the general term 'Chudi' or under the name 'Slaven', if V.V. Sedov's assumption regarding the early Slavicisation of this tribe is correct. Far more convincing is the hypothesis put forward by A.G. Kuzmin and A.S. Korolev that the original form of the epithet indicated an origin in Moravia. Thus, Ilya's most ancient epithet fits naturally into the third layer of the epic's toponymy. In this case, Kyiv is one of the many Danube cities bearing this name – most likely modern-day Kőve in Hungary, opposite the mouth of the Morava. 'Chernigov', lying on the route between it and Ilya's homeland, could be some town called Chernigorod or Chern. The variant 'Smolyagin', together with 'Smalisk' from the Tidrek Saga, is reminiscent of the Danubian Smolyan tribe, whose settlements Attila could well have besieged – so A.S. Korolev's irony turns out to be entirely inappropriate. It is curious, however, that in Slovakia there is Muram Castle, mentioned by Plisetsky in a context unrelated to the bylinas – yet another contender for the title of the Russian bogatyr's homeland.

This layer of geographical names might be termed *'Central European'* or *'narrative'*, as it is firmly linked to the plots of the bylinas, and it is only thanks to this connection that it was not buried beneath later layers reflecting the later geography and ideology of the Rus'.

Chapter 7
The Polyanytsi – Slavic Amazons

Unusual epic characters such as the Polyanytsi fit perfectly within this layer. It is traditionally held that the female warriors in Rus' epics reflect Sarmatian (D.M. Balashov, B.A. Rybakov) or Khazar (S.A. Pletneva, V.V. Kozhinov) realities. In any case, they are associated with the Northern Black Sea region, where ancient tradition supposedly places the Amazons. In reality, ancient authors placed in those regions at most the 'Sarmatians ruled by women'. The Amazons, on the other hand, were 'scattered' by them across the foothills of the North Caucasus. However, there is another, later tradition which locates the Amazons in Central Europe.

One of the earliest authors to mention this tradition is Paul the Deacon, who, drawing on Lombard tribal legends, speaks of their encounter with a people of female warriors somewhere between the shores of the Baltic Sea and Northern Italy. He adds that 'he had heard from certain people that even to this day, deep within Germany, a people of these women still exists'. Two circumstances are particularly noteworthy: firstly, the Amazons are mentioned here outside the context of the ancient tradition, in direct connection with the history of Paul's own people. Secondly, this evidence is corroborated by the observations of contemporary eyewitnesses. Both these features are characteristic of virtually all legends concerning Central European Amazons.

The following account of a people of female warriors from Central Europe comes from the 10th-century Arab Jew Ibrahim ibn Ya'qub, who travelled through Central Europe. 'To the west of the Rus' (here referring to the Eastern European Rus' and Kievan Rus'. – *L. P.*) lies a city of women. They ride horses and go to war themselves, distinguished by their boldness and bravery. Ibrahim ibn Ya'qub, an Israelite, says: the account of this city is true. Huta, the ruler of the Romans, told me about this.' This meticulous Jew, as we can see, was not afraid to vouch with his own name for the truthfulness and reliability of the information provided, and even named his informant. He, incidentally,

turns out to be none other than Otto I, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

Furthermore, among Arab authors, al-Tortushi and al-Idrisi reported on the ‘city of women’ on the shores of the Baltic Sea. It is curious that they mention the neighbouring ‘city of men’ and ‘city of women’. The Central European origins of this narrative will be demonstrated below.

In the following, 11th, century, Adam of Bremen reported on the Amazons in Central Europe: ‘It is said that near these shores of the Baltic Sea there are Amazons… it is also said that they become pregnant by passing merchants and by those held captive by them… And when it comes to childbirth, the male offspring are born with dog-like heads, whilst the female offspring are the most beautiful of women… Those with dog-like heads are those whose heads are on their chests. In Rus’, they are often taken captive, and they ‘bark’ with words.” The historical value of this passage is, as can be seen, highly relative. It is evident that Adam of Bremen’s primary source was the Norse sagas about the ‘Land of Women’, in the vicinity of which lived the dog-headed Hundings, who barked instead of speaking like humans. The Hundings are ‘indigenous’ inhabitants of northern myths (and not only Scandinavian ones – the Estonian ‘Kalevipoeg’ mentions a people of ‘dog-men’ who bark instead of speaking), their eponym is mentioned in the Volsung Saga, and a similar creature is depicted on the famous Sutton Hoo helmet. There is no particular reason to see any ancient influence in them. The same applies to the ‘Land of Women’. A far more convincing explanation for its appearance in the sagas is the folk etymology of the word ‘Kvennland’ – the land of the Finns. But even this is not beyond dispute. In any case, it should be noted that the land of the Amazons is, once again, situated in the vicinity of ‘Rus’. This triad (the Rus – the Amazons – the dog-people) is found in yet another source, which we shall examine below.

For now, however, let us turn to the next source in chronological order, which tells us about the Central European Amazons. This is Kozma of Prague. He states that, during the reign of Queen Libuše, there existed a fortress of female warriors – Devin – on the site of Prague’s Vyšehrad. Next to it, Czech youths built their own fortress. As we can see, this corresponds to the picture painted by al-

Idrisi. It is interesting to note that, unlike previous authors, Kozma associates the Amazons with the history of his own people.

In general, there is a whole range of evidence concerning women – rulers and warriors – amongst the Slavs of Central Europe. Among the Czechs, for instance, there is Libuše and her two sisters, the daughters of Krok. Among the Poles, there is Wanda, daughter of Krak. Niederle quotes Titmar's account of a Slavic princess 'from Northern Hungary… who spent her life on horseback with a cup in her hand and could drink as well as any man'. Finally, according to Saxo Grammaticus, three warrior maidens—Visna (Vesna?), Hete (Hot?) and Vebjorg (?)—led the Slavic army at the Battle of Bravalla. Several burials of women with horses and weapons have been found on the south-eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. A similar one was found in Sweden – and, of course, Norse scholars immediately identified the graves of the female warriors from the south-eastern Baltic as Scandinavian. The last three accounts already pertain to history rather than epic poetry.

The 'Polyanitsas' of Russian epic poetry undoubtedly belong to this circle. Most of the female heroes (the wives of Dunay, Dobrynya and Stavra) hail from the Lyakhovets region. Muromets' daughter comes from the Talyan region, which is certainly not Slavic, but by no means Eastern either. It is quite reasonable to assume that Muromets' partner was a native of one of the Slavic lands, just as much a stranger in the 'Talyansk region' as Ilya himself – such circumstances evidently bring people closer together.

A certain ambiguity regarding Zlatygorka-Latygorka Severianishnaya. A purely Slavic first name and patronymic in the epic do not always indicate a character's Slavic origin. Recall Napoleon, who became Neopalen and then Opalen. Let us recall Kudrevanišče and Grubianišče from the bylinas. However, when combined with the consistent reference to her place of residence 'by the blue sea, by the icy one, by the white pebble, by the latyr', this information allows us to regard her as a native of Central Europe, but by no means of the steppe lands.

I would like to conclude this discussion of Central European Amazons by citing the oldest of the sources that tell of them. This is, without doubt, the 6th-century Syrian author Zacharias Rhetor. He speaks of Amazons who 'live on their own and wage war with weapons and on horseback. There are no men amongst them, but if they wish to survive, they set out peacefully to the neighbouring peoples alongside their

‘They stay in that land and spend about a month there, and then set off for their own land.’ Neighbours , are are ‘dog-people’ (!)[7] , the obscure ‘Amazarats’ and a certain ‘people hrws’, then that is ‘Rus’, ‘men with huge limbs, who have no weapons’.

Petrukhin’s attempt to explain the appearance of the ‘Rus’ people in this context as being influenced by biblical traditions concerning the apocalyptic ‘people of Ros’ is rather far-fetched, as I have already pointed out. However, B.A. Rybakov’s attempt to link this account to the Middle Dnieper region is equally unconvincing. The fact is that the Amazons and their neighbours are situated ‘to the north and west’ of the ‘thirteen peoples’ of the Great Steppe, amongst whom the Avars are mentioned—a people who had by that time already occupied Pannonia. Consequently, this refers not to the Dnieper region, but once again to Central Europe. There, too, we find a parallel to the triad of Amazons, Rus and dog-people, which we encounter in the writings of Adam of Bremen and in the sagas (Kvennaland, Hundingaland, Rusaland). The report—which so alarmed Petrukhin—regarding the Rus’ lack of weapons does indeed contradict what we know about the warlike nature of the Slavs, and of the Rus’ in particular. To the same extent, it is incongruous with a description of the apocalyptic ‘people of Ros’ or ‘heroes of mythical times’, to whom Zakharija Retor Petrukhin endeavours to reduce the mention of the Rus’. On the other hand, Theophylact Simocatta’s description of the Slavic envoys, who ‘were not accustomed to clad their bodies in iron armour – their country knows no iron’ and who struck the emperor with their ‘imposing stature’, bears such a strong resemblance to Retor’s description that it suggests direct textual borrowing. It should be noted that we are referring to the Slavs of Central Europe, who were subject to the Avar khagan. In this connection, it is important to bear in mind that Georgian and Byzantine sources explicitly attribute the siege of Constantinople in 626 to the Rus’.

This parallel is very useful. Were it not for this, we would have no grounds to assume that ‘hrws’ refers specifically to the Rus’ and not, say, the Cherusci. However, both their place in the triad alongside the Psoglavians and the Amazons, and the similarity of the description to the Slavs under the rule of the Avar khagan, lead us to believe that Zacharias Rhetor is referring specifically to the Rus’ – not those of the Dnieper, but the Central European Rus’.

All the information about the Polyanytsi – the Slavic Amazons – fits into the pattern of the third layer of epic toponymy. And, as is easy to see,

this layer coincides remarkably with the geography of Rus', according to the *Tidrek Saga*. In both cases, Rus', quite unexpectedly for the modern reader and, one must suppose, for a 13th-century listener—be they German or Swedish—turns out to be situated somewhere in the middle reaches of the Danube, upstream of Pannonia, not far from the headwaters of the Vistula and the Oder on the one hand, and Northern Italy on the other. The connection between the *Tidrek Saga* and the bylinas turns out to be deeper than those who saw only similarities between individual characters had assumed; deeper even than Veselovsky had believed, who pointed to the coincidence of entire genealogies in the saga and the bylinas. The connection is evident at the geographical level. As for the later place-names of Rus' in the saga, these are easily explained – the place-names in the bylina underwent the same changes under the influence of shifting historical conditions. Such changes, in principle, should come as no surprise. For instance, in the Siberian and Ural bylina about Vasily Buslaev, the setting is shifted from the Volkhov to the Ob. Rakhta Ragnozersky, a hero of a ballad from the Moscow era, 'moved' from Moscow to… Leningrad in later records. According to the archaeologist A.L. Nikitin, the legendary journey of the Apostle Andrew similarly shifted from the Danube to the Dnieper.

In both the sagas and the bylinas, therefore, phenomena of the same order but of a different nature occurred. In both cases, an older system of toponymy was replaced by a later one—one in Scandinavia, the other in Rus'. This suggests that the sagas did not borrow individual heroes from the bylinas. In fact, it is rather difficult to imagine such borrowing even at the level identified by Veselovsky – it is hard to conceive of entire genealogies being transferred from one people to another. The geographical overlap, however, points to a single source for the sagas and bylina – an epic and, possibly, historical one. But it is somewhat premature to speak of this. For now, let us recall that the saga, as well as the bylina, bear witness to the closeness of bylinic Rus' to the Poles and the 'Viltins'. Let us turn to the traditions of the Western Slavs – do they contain any traces of a connection with the Russian bylinic epic?

Chapter 8
Alyosha Popovich and Leszek Popielusz: Bylinas and Epic Traditions of the Western Slavs

The Polish epic, as such, has not survived to the present day. What remains are retellings of individual epic traditions, recorded in the chronicles of Anonymus Gallus, Boguchwal, Kadłubek and others.

The ‘Great Chronicle’ of the Poles preserves a legend about two brothers, the sons of the legendary hero and ruler Krak, the founder of Kraków. They fought a duel, and the elder brother, who, like his father, was called Krak, emerged victorious.

This legend bears a resemblance to the bylin ‘The Princes of Kryakiv’. That tale also recounts a duel between brothers, the sons of a ruler, in which the elder brother, who shares his father’s name, prevails. The brothers’ names in the bylin are Christian, that is to say, of a later period. Moreover, Luka and Peter (Luka and Moses, Luka and Matthew) Petrovich are common epic names for brothers mentioned as a pair. They may appear at the bogatyr outpost, on the field of the Battle of the Kama, in the epic about their sister Alena and Alyosha Popovich, and even in the epic about Vasya Buslaev. In other words, these names are entirely conventional. The princes of Krakow could well have become princes from Kryakov. The names of Krak’s sons are poorly preserved even in Polish tradition, whilst in the bylinas they may have been given the names of epic brothers, with the peculiarity that one of the brothers became, as in the Polish tradition, his father’s namesake.

The author of the *Great Chronicle* went on to recount that a certain ‘weaver’, heir to the Popelyush family, defeated Alexander the Great not by force, but through ‘cunning and trickery’. In honour of this feat, the hero was given the nickname Leshko, meaning ‘deceiver’ or ‘rogue’.

In the epic tradition, there is a well-known hero who defeats his enemies ‘by cunning and trickery’. His name is Alyosha – more commonly Alyoshka in the bylina – Popovich. Kvashnin-Samarin had previously suggested that the original form of this name was, in fact, Leshko. T.N. Kondratyeva attached no significance to this observation, and, in our view, quite needlessly so. Aleshka Popovich and Leshko Popelush seem, at the very least, to be phonetically similar. However, Kondratyeva herself provides evidence

which takes their connection beyond a mere coincidence. Referring to Vladimir Dal's Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language, she points out that in Russian dialects, 'alyoha' and 'alyosha' denote a liar or a braggart, whilst 'to let alyoshkas in' means 'to deceive'. How could a Greek name have acquired such a meaning, if not through its phonetic similarity to the more ancient Leshko – 'rogue, deceiver, liar'? This interpretation of the name clearly owes its popularity to the epic figure of the rogue and deceiver Alyosha-Leshko Popovich-Popelyush.

This raises the question: why is Alyosha-Leshko described in the Polish chronicle

and why was he made the victor over Alexander the Great?

At his first feast in Kyiv, Alyosha quite often appears in the guise of a beggar or a skomorokh. His place by the stove post is the traditional spot for skomorokhs. He plays the gusli. Z.I. Vlasova drew attention to the connection in folklore and documents between skomorokhs and itinerant craftsmen – tailors, weavers and the like. The researcher believed that this association arose due to the persecution of skomorokhs by the tsarist government in the late 17th century. However, she also cites Kozma of Prague, a 12th-century Czech author, in whose works skomorokhs who played the gusli ('kyfarists') are associated with tailors. As can be seen, this is a much older connection. It is curious that even in the Danish fairy tale, which became famous in Andersen's adaptation ('The Emperor's New Clothes'), itinerant weavers act as typical skomorokhi – jesters and miracle-workers (everyone readily believes in the 'miraculous' fabric they produce) rolled into one. However, the Church's relationship with skomorokhs has always been more than a little strained; this is evidently why the Catholic author replaced the skomorokh with a weaver—a figure similar in meaning but comparatively harmless.

Naturally, the *historical* figure of Alexander the Great will be of no use to us in addressing the second question. His campaigns took him far from Polish and, indeed, Slavic lands. What matters more to us is the mythical framework surrounding his image. Alexander's conception was attributed to Zeus in the form of *a serpent*. Plutarch reports that his 'earthly' father, Philip, lost sight in one eye whilst attempting to spy on his wife as she consorted with Zeus the Serpent, and in medieval depictions – Western engravings and Slavic miniatures – this scene is often depicted: Olympias in the dragon's embrace. As for Alexander's death, some medieval legends linked it to an attempt to soar into

the sky by artificial means. He was cast down from the heavens by an enraged god and crashed to the ground. It is not difficult to see that the image of Alyosha's chief enemy, before whom he appeared as a skomorokh ('weaver') and whom he defeated 'by cunning and trickery', Tugarin *Zmeevich*—who soared into the heavens on wings of fire or paper and was cast down from there by rain—sometimes a thunderstorm—sent by God in answer to Alyosha's prayers—could well have evoked associations with Alexander in the mind of a well-read cleric. This was in the spirit of the *Great Chronicle*, with its tracing of Volin's lineage back to Julius Caesar and Demin's to Domna Augusta, and its transformation of Popielusz into Pompilius, and so on.

So, the Polish hero is called Leszek Popielusz, and the Russian one – Alyosha Popovich. There is a clear similarity between the names. 'Alekha' in Russian dialects and 'Leszek' in Polish mean a rogue or a trickster. There is a clear similarity in the semantics of the names. The Polish hero is a 'weaver'-skomorokh, whilst the Russian one disguises himself as a skomorokh. Both defeat the enemy through cunning. In both tales, the enemy is the son of the Serpent, and he perishes whilst attempting to soar into the heavens. As B.N. Yarkho put it on a similar occasion, 'strong arguments are needed to deny the original identity of the characters given such similarities'.

In West Slavic and Northern Russian fairy tales, a legend has survived about a hero nicknamed Popyalov, Popyalyushka, Popelyukh, Popelvar or Popelchek. Through cunning, he defeats an enemy riding a winged horse—a creature combining the features of a serpent and a horseman, accompanied by ravens and hounds—that is to say, one that completely mirrors the image of Tugarin in the bylinas. And since the bylin hero's nickname, by all accounts, is merely homophonous with the word 'popovich' but actually derives from 'Popel' – meaning 'ashes' – there is nothing strange about his 'pagan' behaviour.

It is precisely in the *Great Chronicle* that a description of a warrior's suicide—throwing himself upon his sword—has been preserved, one that is in every respect similar to those found in the bylinas.

Another fact is also worth noting: Polish is the only Slavic language, apart from Russian, to have retained the word
'bogatyr' (bohater, bohatyr, bohaterz) in the sense of 'hero'. The Ukrainian
'bogatyr' is a later literary borrowing from Russian, whilst the Belarusian 'bagatyr' is, in essence, merely homophonous with the Polish and Russian words, denoting a completely different concept – a rich man. On the other hand, it is precisely the *Great Chronicle* that, in true bylin style, refers to the enemies who attacked Poland in the 10th century as a 'horde'
'Tatars'. Thus, it is as though both poles of epic consciousness –

bogatyrs and ‘Tatars’ – are present in the Polish language, and specifically in the epic sense: heroes and generalised enemies, respectively.

No epic tales of the ‘Viltins’, the ‘Velets’ or the ‘Lyutichs’ have survived. Nor has the people themselves survived. It is only from Khomyakov’s observations that we can infer that, amongst their Germanised descendants, the notion of Dietrich-Theodoric as a villain continued to persist. The description of the massacre of the enemy, as already noted, corresponded literally to the customs of the Baltic Slavs (see the chapter ‘The Skull-Trophy’), but this custom has too many parallels to serve as an indicator of the ethnic origin of this motif. Another epic motif is far more reliable. In the epic about Prince Boris Romanovich, a ‘wild boar’ emerges from the ‘blue sea’. The situation is rather unusual – wild boars are rare visitors to seashores. However, it finds a perfect parallel in the legend of the Lutichians, who believed ‘that if they were ever threatened by the hardships of a cruel and prolonged period of turmoil (in other translations – civil war, internal war. – *L. P.*), a great boar with snow-white tusks would emerge from the aforementioned lake (the sacred lake of the Lyutichs, Tollenzee, on the shores of which stood the town of Radigoshch with the temple of Svarozhich. – *L. P.*)’.

The epic concludes with a long and bloody battle between the Russian prince-hero and the armies sent against him by Vladimir.

This unique belief of the Lutich people is vividly illustrated in the plot of the Russian bylina.

Thus, the Slavic legends of Central Europe share points of convergence with Russian bylinas; points of convergence that lie far beyond the realm of banal ‘wandering motifs’ such as serpent-slaying or coincidences permissible under the theory of probability.

Chapter 9
The Rus' on the Latin Roads: The Historical Reality of the Third Layer of Epic Geography

How, then, can we explain such a close interconnection between the Russian epic and the traditions of the Germanic and Slavic peoples of Central Europe? A mere 'borrowing' could not account for the level of detail revealed by Veselovsky in his latest works – the coincidences in the genealogies of the heroes. Nor, a fortiori, can the geographical coincidences be explained by this method.

Meanwhile, the bylina contain a wealth of features pointing to Central Europe as the epic's cradle. Let us recall how frequently we have encountered the Celts. It is amongst the Celts that we find an analogue to the cult of heads and stones, embodied in the 'white-burning pebble' and the magical head in the bylina about Vasily Buslaev; it is amongst them that we find, in general, the richest tradition of head-hunting and the crafting of cups (skordiski) from the heads. Ritual suicide in the bylina and burial in an oak tomb, as described in the bylina
'Mikhail Potyk'. And the Celtic influence is particularly strong in the theme of the sacred ruler – the description of Vladimir's hall, and the earlier description by Ibn Fadlan of the hall of the 'King of the Rus', almost entirely echoes Irish descriptions of the kings' banquet halls. The Celtic analogies regarding the figure of Apraksei are the most abundant.

In this regard, one circumstance attracts attention, to which even S.I. Dmitrieva, who discovered it, did not give due consideration. On the Middle Mezen, that is, in what her own research identifies as the oldest of the centres of the epic tradition, there was a custom of lighting bonfires on the hills near villages on the night of 1 May.

A number of nineteenth-century Russian ethnographers unanimously asserted that the celebration of the first day of the last month of spring was a custom entirely unknown to the Russian countryside, purely urban in nature and borrowed from the West. It is all the more surprising to find it in the remote reaches of the Russian North, in one of the strongholds of the 'Old Belief' with its well-known attitude towards the Western 'novelties' of the Antichrist Peter, along with his closest predecessors and followers.

Moreover, the way this day was observed by townspeople in the 18th–19th centuries and by the inhabitants of Srednyaya Mezen differed markedly from one another.

The latter, however, bore a strong resemblance to the ancient European custom of ‘May bonfires’ – the Celtic Beltane and the Germanic Walpurgis Night – which are typologically similar to the East Slavic Kupala. In any case, Western authors’ descriptions of these festivities are very close to our descriptions of Kupala: the same leaping over the fire, the same decoration of the ritual tree, the same ritual freedom of interaction between the sexes, and, finally, the same conception of this day as a day of the might of all manner of unknown forces. It is interesting to note, incidentally, that it was precisely Ivan Kupala that was celebrated very sparingly, if at all, in Pomorje.

The eastern boundary of Europe’s ‘May bonfires’, apart from the Mezen centre, lies in Silesia and Galicia, where this festival was known as Turitsy. It is interesting to note that some Western researchers regard the custom of ‘May bonfires’ as a defining characteristic of the original Celtic population in the areas where the rite was practised. Since it is impossible to suppose that the earliest Russian settlers encountered Celts on the banks of the Mezen, it must obviously be assumed that they came to these places from regions where a Celtic substratum was present—that is, once again, from Central Europe.

Thus, the Central European features in the socio-cultural archaism of the bylinas, together with the geography of the bylinas and a number of parallels between them and the epics of Central Europe, and, finally, the ethnographic characteristics of the population in the earliest centres of the bylin tradition, lead us to suppose that a certain population group arrived in Eastern Europe from Central Europe, bringing their epic tradition with them.

There is no need to speculate as to what this group was. As mentioned above, the Kyiv cycle of bylinas, based on ethnographic data and the heroes’ self-identification, can be regarded as the tribal epic of the Rus’. It is precisely the Rus’ who are mentioned in the *Tidrek Saga* and the poems about Ortnit. However, is there any evidence allowing us to link the historical Rus’ to the territory where their epic geography is situated
of the *Tidrek Saga* and the third layer of the geography of Rus’ epics?

Chapter 10
Bylinas Take Root: Danubian Rus' in Historical Sources

Strange as it may seem, such evidence does exist. A.V. Nazarenko has compiled an impressive collection of references in medieval High German documents to a certain Rus' on the Middle Danube. One of Louis the German's charters mentions the 'Russian Mark', situated on the southern bank of the Danube. A little further north-west, the river Russkaya Mühl (now Grossmühl, due to the similarity in sound) flowed into the Danube. A.V. Nazarenko identified a whole series of place-names and personal names mentioned in medieval Upper German documents, derived from the word 'Russian, Rus'.

A.V. Nazarenko himself attributed the emergence of these place names to the active trade with Kievan Rus' conducted by German towns on the Upper Danube. It is difficult to take such an interpretation seriously. For this to be the case, Rus' merchants from the banks of the Dnieper would have had to become regular visitors to the upper reaches of the Danube as early as 863, whereas, according to the Rus' chronicles, the Rus' had not yet appeared in the Dnieper region at that time. The first reliable Greek accounts of the Rus date from the same period. Thus, the Rus were newcomers to the Dnieper at that time, and recent arrivals at that. Moreover, 'it is unlikely that the place-names containing *the* ethnonym "Rus" at their core were left behind by visiting merchants from Kievan Rus. It is unquestionable evidence of a Slavic population living in this region,' writes archaeologist V.V. Sedov. There are also other accounts of Danubian Rus' that do not fit at all into Nazarenko's concept: Hungarian documents
from the 11th century refer to Saint Imre as the 'Duke of the Rus'; the Arab al-Idrisi, alongside the 'three kinds of Rus' so frequently mentioned in Arabic literature—who are usually situated in Eastern Europe—also mentions 'other Rus' living near the 'land of Unkaraya', that is, Hungary. Both these accounts (along with others not mentioned here due to lack of space) suggest the existence of a fairly large region in Central Europe inhabited by the Rus', whilst the High German documents clearly define the location of this

region. In his early work, A.V. Nazarenko, based on the form of the ethnonym ‘Rus’ in High German, suggested that this ethnonym had undergone High German consonant shift, which enabled him to date it to no later than the 6th–7th centuries. He subsequently abandoned this conclusion because, in his words, ‘one must accept one of two (equally improbable) possibilities: either *the* Old Russian **rus’* and the Old High German **Ruzz-* developed independently of one another… or the Old Russian ‘*rus’* was a borrowing from Old High German’. It seems that this dilemma stems from the notion that Slavic Rus’ must have had an Eastern European origin. Nazarenko, like many other researchers, flits between the Dnieper region and Scandinavia in search of the origins of Rus’, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge the numerous pieces of evidence for the existence of the Rus’ people between the Danube and the southern coast of the Baltic Sea.

Nevertheless, Danubian Rus’ is a reality, repeatedly attested by sources. Historians who are unwilling to accept the obviously flawed attempt to ‘explain’
‘Rus’ names, nicknames and titles in the Middle Danube region by the arrival of Kyiv merchants there, are forced to seek some other explanation. Thus, V.V. Sedov suggests that the Sarmatian-Slavic Rus’, together with the Ants, reached the Middle Danube as part of the ‘Ant migration’. There is no denying that the Antes were frequent visitors to those parts – they even feature in local folklore as giants. However, the theory put forward by E. Tselner and A.G. Kuzmin appears more plausible; they point to the existence, in literally the very same places during the Great Migration of Peoples, of the barbarian ‘kingdom’ of the Rugians, often referred to as Rugiland. The latter place-name is the name given to this country by the Germanic-speaking Lombards. We have no evidence to suggest that the Rugians themselves spoke a Germanic language or called themselves Rugians, nor that they referred to their country as Rugiland. Jordan explicitly distinguishes the Rugians from the Germanic peoples. The name ‘Rugi’ itself is found only among the Romans, who received information about the people bearing this name through the Germans, or among Latin-speaking Germanic authors of the Middle Ages. Thus, the word ‘Rugi’ can be seen as a typical exonym—a name given to a people by others—which, moreover, arose through a double

intermediaries of languages foreign to them – Germanic and Latin. Put simply, there was no people who called themselves the Rugians, just as there was no people who called themselves ‘Urus’, ‘Zyuch’ or ‘Rashen’.
The ‘Rugi’ of the Latin-speaking historians called themselves Rus.

In medieval Latin-language German sources, the Rus are always referred to as ‘Rugi’. It is widely known that Princess Olga, baptised as Helena, is mentioned as ‘Helena, Queen of the Rugi’ in the ‘Chronicle of Regino the Continuator’. The Raffelshtetten Trade Charter (904) mentions ‘Slavs from the Rugians’ arriving in this Upper German town to trade. Nazarenko is hesitant to hastily classify the identification of the Rus’ and the Rugians as ‘literary’ ethnonyms based on mere phonetic similarity. ‘Virtually all instances of its use are in one way or another linked to eyewitness accounts (that is, reports from eyewitnesses. – *L. P.*), which significantly undermines the assumption regarding the literary nature of the term as applied to Rus’, he observes. A.G. Kuzmin, who examined a vast number of such accounts and paid particular attention to source reports concerning the Rus’ in Central Europe, expressed himself even more categorically: ‘The identity of the Rugians and the Rus’ is not a hypothesis, nor even a conclusion. It is a fact lying on the surface, a straightforward reading of the sources, and any disagreement with it must be seriously substantiated.’

The Danubian realm of the Rugians is attested in the sources from the beginning of the 3rd century until the 80s of the 5th century, when it was conquered by the Roman ruler Odoacer, who was also of Rugian origin. It is more than likely that its historical existence did not end there; rather, the Danubian Rugians-Rus simply ceased to act as an independent political force. In the following century, the Rus’, together with neighbouring Slavic and non-Slavic tribes, came under the rule of the Avars, from whom they may have borrowed the title of ‘khan’, as attested by chroniclers of the same Louis the German in reference to the Rus’. Let us recall that in the chronicles of the Tiflis Cathedral and in the writings of the Byzantine historian Manasses, the Slavs in the Avar army of 626 are identified precisely as the Rus’, and it was there, in Central Europe, that Zacharias Rhetor apparently situated his
‘Rus people’. The geographical location of the Rugians-Rus’ realm corresponds perfectly both to the ‘Rus Mark’ and the region of ‘Rus’ place-names on the Middle Danube, as well as to the ‘Rusinaland’ of the ‘Tidrek Saga’, together with the third layer of epic geography. It was precisely the Rugians-Rus’

who were at war with both Attila and Theodoric, Tidrek and Dedrik, as described in the 'Tidrek Saga'. A significant portion of the Rus' may, following the fall of their realm, have retreated to their ancestral homeland on the southern shores of the Baltic, where their island of Rügen—the 'island of the Rus' as described by Arab geographers—was situated. They may have brought the epic with them – though, thanks to their connections with their ancestral homeland, the epic may well have reached the shores of the Baltic Sea earlier, just as the epic traditions of the Danubian Germanic peoples found their way into the Scandinavian sagas, forming the basis of the Volsung Saga and the heroic poems of the Elder Edda. And from there, whether alongside the first Wendish colonists or with the second wave of migration – the so-called 'calling of the Varangians' – it found its way into Eastern Europe.

Of course, the history of the epic did not end there. In the 9th–10th centuries, the Rugi-Rus who had arrived in Eastern Europe found themselves in a state of almost constant warfare with Khazaria, Byzantium, the barbarians of the Turkic steppe and the Finno-Ugric forests. This could not fail to influence the final formation of the plots and characters of the Russian epic. Subsequent eras introduced changes to it exclusively at the level of vocabulary, names and titles, without introducing new plots or heroes. But this topic requires separate research.

For now, we can draw some conclusions. The ethnographic features of socio-cultural archaism in the bylina and parallels to the bylina in the epics of the Slavic and Scandino-Germanic peoples of Central Europe allow us to speak of them as the tribal epic of the Varangians-Rus', known in Western Latin-language sources as the Rugians. A comparative analysis of material from Russian bylina and parallel material from Central European epics suggests that the original theme of this epic was the clashes between the Rus' and the Goths and Huns on the Middle Danube during the Great Migration (and, naturally, 'peaceful' themes of intra-tribal life). As they migrated eastwards across Europe, the Rus incorporated into their epic the legends of their kindred Wendish colonists – the Ilmen Slavs and the Krivichians – recounting the deeds of the eponymous heroes of these tribes: Slovey-Slaven, his son Volkh, and the Krivichian prince Mikula. The bylinas themselves prove to be a valuable historical source, providing unequivocal evidence in favour of the identity of the Rugians and the Rus' and, consequently, of the origin of Rus' from the southern, Slavic shores of the Baltic Sea, the Varangian Sea.

Conclusion

As already mentioned in the first chapter, drawing conclusions in the humanities is an extremely thankless task. In the case of the subject under consideration, it is also premature. A serious, systematic and focused study of that most ancient layer of the Russian bylin epic, which we have examined in this book, has only just begun. In this work, it would be more appropriate to limit ourselves to conclusions drawn from the data examined.

Throughout the entire period of scholarly study of the bylina, researchers from a wide variety of schools have drawn attention to certain features of the worldview or social structure in the bylina that did not fit with the notion, inherited from the pre-scientific era, of the identity of Vladimir Krasno-Solnyshko with Vladimir the Baptist. These features were given the most attention by researchers of the mythological school (A.A. Kotlyarevsky, F.I. Buslaev) and A.N. Veselovsky.

In the mid-twentieth century, researchers once again turned their attention to the layer of 'excessively ancient' features of everyday life and culture in the bylina. V. Ya. Propp, B. A. Rybakov, M. M. Plisetsky and D. S. Likhachev touched upon this in passing. I.P. Tsapenko and V.V. Cherdyncev devoted specific studies to this topic. Unfortunately, the latter's work was not published at the time, whilst the former's work, published at the height of the fierce controversy between B.A. Rybakov and V.Y. Propp, was met with hostility by one side and failed to find support from the other (due to fundamental methodological differences).

Nevertheless, research into this field continued. R.S. Lipets developed – apparently independently of Cherdyncev, whose work remained unknown to the vast majority of researchers – a methodology for studying the socio-cultural archaisms of the epic and for using them to date the epic chronologically. She also concluded that by the 10th century the Russian epic had already completed its formation. Unfortunately, Lipets drew no conclusions from this, remaining within the framework of the 'new

historical school', which regarded the bylina as a monument to the eras of Vladimir the Baptist and even Vladimir Monomakh.

In the late 1990s, researchers who had been actively involved in the debate between the followers of V.Y. Propp and B.A. Rybakov on opposing sides published studies almost simultaneously in which they shifted the date of the epic's formation to the middle of the first millennium of the Christian era, during the Great Migration.

Using the methodology of R.S. Lipets and V.V. Cherdyncev, in this paper the author has examined, in a sequential and retrospective order, those features of culture and society reflected in the bylina that preclude the notion of their formation during the Muscovite era, following the baptism of 988, and, finally, those features which suggest the existence of bylinas in the mid-10th century and their depiction of customs and social relations that were already archaic for that era.

By drawing on relatively late-recorded Novgorod traditions (the Ioakim Chronicle, the Mazurinsky Chronicler, etc.) and medieval adaptations of Germanic epics—the connections between which and the bylina had already been examined by A.N. Veselovsky and S.N. Azbelev—have made it possible to greatly expand the scope of these connections and to refine Azbelev's conclusions, Yudin and Froyanov. The most ancient layer of bylin geography, the names of heroes—not in isolation but as entire, ramified genealogies—and specific plot structures, at a level far exceeding the bounds of banal

'wandering plots' or 'borrowings', link the bylina to the European epic of the Great Migration period. This connection is such that it allows us to speak of the formation of the primary forms of the Russian epic—so to speak, proto-bylina—as the tribal epic of the European Rus' (referred to as the Rugians in Latin-language sources). Subsequently, summoned to Eastern Europe by their kinsmen, the Wendish colonists – the Ilmen Slavs ('the summoning of the Varangians') – the Rugians-Rus' brought their own epic with them, which, having merged—against the backdrop of a joint struggle against the Finno-Ugric and Turkic indigenous peoples of Eastern Europe, and in particular Khazaria—with the traditions of the Wends-Slavs and Krivichians themselves, had evolved into bylina by the 10th century. The era of travel and migration, particularly by sea, seems to have been reflected not only in the figure of the Nightingale

Budimirovich, but also in the theme of the ‘Falcon-ship’, and in those episodes where enemies (traditionally referred to by the epic, generalised term ‘Tatars’) approach the capital, Kyiv… by ship. This is undoubtedly a reflection of the way of life of the Viking-Wends of the Baltic.

Since the Varangian Rus’, on the one hand, largely constituted the military elite of the young state, and on the other, were themselves organised along the lines of military units (recall the unanimous accounts in Arabic, Greek and Old Russian sources that the Rus’ were engaged solely in warfare, the collection of tribute and trade, whilst neglecting craftsmanship and agriculture), the epic that emerged bore the hallmarks of a druzhina-based tradition. However, it survived only in the north of Rus’, in the Novgorod region, within a milieu akin to that of the Varangian-Rus’. In the south, the Rus’, who were relatively few in number, partly intermingled with the Polans and partly perished, without their numbers being replenished, in wars against the steppe peoples, Khazaria, Byzantium, and in punitive expeditions against the forest tribes. Thus, the demise of that group of Rus’ whom the Deacon refers to as ‘the entire young generation of the Tavrians’, and whom Sviatoslav’s treaty refers to as ‘all of Rus’’, led to a situation where, a generation later, ‘Varyazhko’ became a personal name in Kyiv. This, as has long been noted, indicates that there were almost no Varangians in Kyiv at that time. This is confirmed by the following fact: when a detachment that had once again arrived from the Varangian Sea wished to set off for Byzantium, it evidently failed to find any fellow tribesmen in Kyiv and was forced to ask the Prince of Kyiv for guides. The local population, markedly different from the newcomers in language and culture, had no opportunity to adopt their epic traditions. It is possible that they had no desire to do so either. I. Ya. Froyanov suggests that it was the Polyan community of Kyiv that betrayed the Varangian-Russian prince Svyatoslav and his druzhina, abandoning him to perish in the Pecheneg steppe. And although, contrary to Froyanov’s view, one should not underestimate the role of religious conflict between the pagans led by Svyatoslav and the Christian community, one cannot deny the possibility of a negative attitude on the part of the Polans towards the newcomers. All the more so, a negative attitude towards the Rus’ and their culture should be suspected among the ‘oppressed’ Drevlians and Ulichs. In contrast, in the Russian North, where the ‘men of Novgorod of Varangian descent’ settled, the epic of the Varangian-Rus’ druzhinas (albeit in a modified form) managed to survive into the 20th century.

Since, as already mentioned, a systematic study of the earliest layers of the Rus' epic tradition is only just beginning, these conclusions, of course, cannot under any circumstances be regarded as definitive. Yet even at this stage, the bylinas reveal themselves to be an independent and invaluable historical source, containing a wealth of unique data. Unfortunately, the nature of this source is such that it practically precludes its use for studying specific historical facts and events in the history of the Rus'. And this is not because such facts were not reflected in the epic, as Putilov and his like-minded scholars claim, but because we have no points of reference for clarifying and interpreting this data, whilst the changes that have occurred in the epic over one and a half thousand years—and during its transmission from Central Europe to Eastern Europe—are far too great. Based on the *Tidrek Saga* and the *Chronicle of St Joachim*, it can be asserted that the ruler of the Rus' people sometime in the 5th century AD was a certain Vladimir, and the military leader was a certain
'Ilias' (it is not possible to reconstruct the pre-Christian pronunciation of the name), but nothing more. To speculate as to who is reflected, for example, in the figure of Idolishche (Odolishche, Neodolishche, Izdolishche, Udolishche, etc.) Pogany – Attila (Attilishche?), Theodoric (Diderishche?) or a generalised image of a Khazar Jew (Iudolishche?) – would mean reviving the worst methods of the historical school, and on a far shakier basis than that of Rybakov and his followers. On the other hand, for the history of the ethnogenesis of the Rus' and the Eastern Slavs, for the history of culture, way of life, customs, beliefs and mores—for what Chesterton once termed 'psychological history'—the bylina epics represent a truly invaluable treasure trove of data. All the more invaluable because, in recent times, interest in the study of 'way of life and customs' has begun to be actively rekindled.

It is the firm conviction of the author of these lines that it is precisely the study of the socio-cultural archaisms of the bylinas that is most fruitful for historians. And if, in spite of the scepticism and nihilism of the last decade, this study is to continue, it must do so along precisely these lines. It is precisely the unification of the methods of both schools of 20th-century bylinology, and the end of their senseless and even harmful rivalry, that must pave the way to new insights into the origins, worldview, way of life and culture of our ancestors, as contained in the Russian epic.

As for those readers who have not devoted their lives to the study of history, I very much hope that my book will prove of interest to them as well. Bylinas are valuable not only for their historical content. This is our epic; it is the voice of our shared past, of our people. It contains no less drama, no fewer feats and tragedies than the legends of the Greeks or the grim sagas of the Scandinavians; no less beauty, nobility and wisdom than the legends of King Arthur's Round Table. Look into the face of the bylina, into the face of Rus', and realise how little this face has in common with that silly, fairground-and-popular-art, sarafane-and-caftan, chastushka-and-balalaika 'Russianness' that our Westernisers love to snigger at and to which many so-called patriots pray. This is our epic, the contemporary of the Nibelungen, the contemporary of the Round Table – the epic of Russian Europe. It is fierce and beautiful, like a falcon that soared menacingly towards the enemy beneath the banners of Rurik and his Varangians, who brought it to the lands of Eastern Europe.

Look into the face of the bylina – and perhaps it will hold out to you… no, no, not a wooden ladle in colourful khokhloma, but a great-great-grandfather's cup fashioned from an enemy's skull. And the ancient Power splashing within it will wash away from our feeble hands and unsteady legs the cloying mould of our innate weariness – 'but what, they say, can I…'

You can, reader. Or rather – we can. Read the bylina, and you will understand: a people who created and preserved SUCH an epic can truly do anything.

As for me, I am not saying goodbye – neither to you, reader, nor to the bylina. The world of the Russian epic still holds many fascinating secrets – and quite a few answers to the riddles of the present day.

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Appendix I

The Village Gods of ‘Orthodox’ Rus’

– Go on, then, to God’s church, and pray to our mighty gods!

The epic poem ‘Ilya Muromets and King Kalin’

For five centuries, Christian preachers tried to hammer the basic concepts of monotheism into the stubborn Slavic minds – but to no avail.

V.V. Kolesov, ‘Ancient Rus’ – A Legacy in Words’

Historians and ethnographers have long noted that, following the Christianisation of Rus’, many ancient gods by no means lost their worshippers. It was simply that people began to venerate the ancient deities under the names of Orthodox saints – Perun, the thunderer, came to be known as the prophet Elijah; Makosh, who weaves the fates of mankind, as Paraskeva-Pyatnitsa; and so on. However, the focus has usually been on identifying such ‘High Gods’ within the cult of Orthodox saints, generally on a case-by-case basis. And it seems that no one paid much attention to the independent pantheon that had developed within rural Orthodoxy.

The words ‘Orthodoxy’ and ‘pantheon’ seem incompatible – after all, even the Orthodox Creed begins with the words ‘I believe in *one* God’, and the very first of the Ten Commandments does not state
‘Thou shalt not kill’, as is somehow commonly believed. ‘I am the Lord thy God, the God of thy fathers; *thou shalt have no other gods before* me’ (Exodus 20:2–3).

And yet such a belief did exist. The baptised Russian peasant stubbornly, from age to age, referred to as gods those whom the Church commanded to be called saints. Here is a brief list of these deities, whose veneration continued into the nineteenth century, and in some places even into the twentieth: Vlasiy – the god of cows, Mamant – the god of sheep, Zosima and Savvatiy – the gods of bees, Basil of Caesarea – the god of pigs, Flor and Lavr – the gods of horses, Kozma and Demyan – the gods of chickens.

We can trace this cult by following the trail through the centuries from one mention to the next. In the 18th century, during confession, people were asked:
‘Do you not call the icons of the saints “gods”?’ In Gabriel Dobuzhinsky’s *Rite of Confession*, those who call the icons of the saints ‘gods’ are sternly rebuked. In 1667, the Council specifically noted that ‘uneducated people call their own icons their gods, which shows that they do not understand the unity of God, and indeed promote polytheism’. What of these ‘uneducated people’, when Archbishop Stephen of Suzdal himself was accused in 1660 of calling Basil of Caesarea a ‘swine-god’? And half a century before him, an unnamed companion of the Englishman A. Jenkinson, who had visited Russia, wrote as follows: ‘Many, mostly the poor, when asked “how many gods?”, would answer “very many”, since they regard every image they possess as a god.’

As we can see, the Church condemned the cult of village gods as idolatry and polytheism; in simpler terms, as paganism. Researchers of the Orthodox pantheon had no doubts about this either. Vladimir Dal attributed the custom of ‘in certain cases addressing prayers exclusively to one or another holy intercessor’, in particular, ‘against livestock disease – to St Medost, and also to St Vlas; against horse disease – to St Flora and St Lavra; for sheep – to St Mamont or St Anastasia; for pigs – to St Basil the Great; for bees – to St Zosima and St Savvatius; and for hens – to St Cosmas and St Damian” as “remnants of paganism”.

Subsequently, many researchers of the spiritual life of the Russian people have addressed this topic; however, it seems that no one has yet asked the question: when and exactly how did this strange fusion of paganism and Christianity arise? It is curious that the relationships between the village gods and the animals under their patronage were also not entirely Christian – not to say entirely non-Christian! For instance, cows were called ‘Vlasyev’s kin’ – that is, ‘the cow god’ Vlasy was regarded as the progenitor of cows, their forefather, much like in the spiritual verse ‘The Book of the Dove’, which just as bizarrely combines Christian names and symbols with outright paganism, listing the ‘fathers’ or ‘mothers’ of beasts, birds, fish and trees. The universe is presented as one vast tribe, and every kind of living creature and phenomenon has its own progenitor and head, ‘the father (mother) of all beasts (birds, fish, etc.)’ – Indrik the

the beast, Stratim the bird, Kita the fish, and so on. The village gods – patrons and, apparently, ancestors of cows, sheep and chickens – fit perfectly into this worldview. But how and when did Orthodox saints come to occupy such a strange place in the worldview of the Russian people? After all, let us say, Flor and Lavr had no connection whatsoever with horse-breeding during their lifetimes and may never even have ridden a horse. Yet the Russian people not only elevated them to the status of 'horse gods' or even
a 'horse god' – in the singular! – but also wished to see them depicted on icons, contrary to the canons, alongside horses and grooms, a practice denounced in 1709 by Dmitry of Rostov as 'utter nonsense!', and thirteen years later even banned by a special decree of the Holy Synod.

They painted them anyway.

The 'Cow God' Modest also 'got a share' of this treatment. Whilst another
'cow god', Vlasiy, had indeed been a herdsman in life, the cows depicted in his 'colleague's' icons had strayed straight from the village pantheon, not in the least bothered by their absence from the saint's hagiography. Once again, bans were imposed – and just as often, they came to nothing.

Alongside icons, the gods were also venerated in objects that had absolutely nothing in common with the Orthodox faith. An icon of Vlasy could easily be replaced, as a charm for the cowshed or at the 'edge' of the village against
'cattle death' – an outbreak of livestock disease – a bear's skull. Moreover, both the icon and the skull were referred to in such cases as the 'Cattle God'!
Not only Saints Cosmas and Damian could be called the 'Chicken God', but also holey objects hung in the henhouse – stones with natural holes, ancient stone axes and hammers (it is interesting to note that in folk Orthodoxy, Cosmas and Damian were also known as 'God's blacksmiths' or the 'God of crafts'), pots without bottoms, bast shoes without soles, and, finally, the broken necks of jugs. It is hardly a Christian approach to equate a saint (or, more precisely, two saints!) with a holey bast shoe. So the roots of the cult of village gods must be sought outside the Orthodox tradition.

Something remarkably similar can be found amongst the closest neighbours and kinsmen of the Eastern Slavs: the Balts. Apart from the 'high' deities, often shared with the Slavs, such as Div-Dievs, Perun-Perkun, Veles-Vels and Lada, there also existed a stratum which the researchers of Baltic mythology, Toporov and Ivanov, refer to as the 'second stratum'. Here,

all the gods of the Russian Orthodox peasant find their exact counterparts – Mamant, the god of sheep, corresponds to Eratinis, the patron of these animals. Bubilas, like Zosima and Savvatiy, looks after the bees. Karvaitis, like Vlasiy and Medost, looks after the cows. Kremata or Kyaule Kryukas is the patron of pigs – just like Basil of Caesarea. The horse gods Flora and Lavra correspond to Usinsh (to whom two loaves of bread are offered, leading scholars to suggest that Usinsh is a pair of twins, much like the Indo-Aryan Ashvins, with whom they are closely associated) and a certain Haurirari, a name somewhat reminiscent of Flora and Lavra.

So, it is clear that the pantheon of the Russian Orthodox village is a legacy of paganism. Another question arises: HOW did it come about?

Here, it is not a retrospective approach – tracing source accounts of the cult of village gods back into the past – that will help us. Rather, the method of ethnographic analogies is more appropriate here. Among the peoples of the Volga and Kama regions, the supplanting of overt paganism by dual faith did not occur in the distant Middle Ages, as it did among the Eastern Slavs and Balts, but in the Modern Era, right before the eyes of ethnographers. And here, some very curious parallels emerge.

The Udmurts' ancestral deities, the so-called 'vorshuds', were once venerated in the form of idols. Made of clay, wood, silver, or even moulded from dough, they took the form of humans or humanoid creatures, as well as horses, oxen, swans, and a wooden goose with an iron beak…

Soon, however, these idols disappeared. In their place, at the centre of the rituals of the pagan Udmurts, was the 'tandem' already familiar to us: the fetish (a Vorshud box containing revered objects) and… the Orthodox icon. Icons ('obros', from the Russian 'obraz') were kept in the homes of the vtsyasey priests and were solemnly carried out to the sanctuary during pagan rituals.

After all, keeping idols had become highly dangerous during the period of Christianisation. By doing so, the keeper of idols exposed himself as a pagan. Such behaviour meant inviting trouble; the least of which, perhaps, was that duties relieved from fellow tribesmen loyal to the new faith were shifted onto the stubborn 'idol-worshipper'. There is no need to mention the worst punishments – there was flogging, nostrils torn out, stocks, and exile… the former sanctuaries were partly destroyed by zealous

preachers (the priest P. Myshkin alone boasted of destroying fifty vorshuds), whilst others were hidden away by the Udmurts themselves – just to be on the safe side. So they had to make do with fetishes that appeared neutral. Who would bother to investigate what sort of birch-bark box with a squirrel's tail, a pike's head and a black grouse's wing was sitting on the shelf in the home prayer room—the 'kua'—which had been converted into a summer kitchen? And the icons certainly looked perfectly harmless. Meanwhile, as has already been mentioned, these icons were often kept not merely by pagans, but by priests!

The Udmurts, of course, were by no means unique in terms of transforming Christian images into objects of pagan rituals. There is a well-known case where, in the shrine of a West Siberian tribe, a folding icon was found depicting the Mother of God, Christ and Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker, carefully wrapped in expensive furs and generously smeared with fat and blood. When asked who was depicted on the icon, the shrine's priests replied without hesitation: the Good Shaitan, the Great Shaitan and the Stern Shaitan, respectively.

Finally, we come across another curious example on the other side of the world, amongst people of a completely different culture, language and race. African slaves in America were also deprived of their sacred objects. Naturally, the slave traders who filled their holds with 'black wood' had not provided any space for idols in the overcrowded holds. Moreover, it was unsafe to make idols in their new surroundings. The masters—some out of Christian zeal, others out of fear of the malevolent magic of Black people—cruelly persecuted
the 'idolatry' of their living property. The solution to which the slaves resorted literally mirrors that used by the Udmurts and, in all likelihood, by medieval Russian pagans. They worshipped their gods in the guise of Catholic saints and fetishes. Thus, the goddess of the sea, Yemanjí, was venerated in the form of statues of the Madonna and/or a seashell. Shango, the god of war and iron, was venerated in the form of statues of Saint Barbara (the great martyr's attribute was an axe) and/or an iron axe. In the syncretic cults of Latin America (Voodoo, Santería, etc.), such veneration continues to this day.

In medieval Russian villages, it can be said with certainty that the same thing took place, all the more so as the ecclesiastical and secular authorities were far less deferential towards Russian pagans – after all, the baptism of the Udmurts took place mainly during the Enlightenment

18th century. Even Fyodor Ioannovich was praised for exterminating idol-worshippers. As for earlier eras, there is nothing to say about them – to quote I. Ya. Froyanov's apt and vivid expression,
'Christianity began its journey in the lands conquered by Kyiv, splattered with blood.' That is why it was both easier and safer to pray to the new icons. And just as Siberian priests referred to the Virgin Mary—whose icon they prayed to—as the 'Good Shaitan', and just as enslaved Black people called the statues of Saint Patrick 'Damballa', so too did the icons
of the 'Orthodox' peasants became imbued with alien powers, alien titles, and, consequently, alien veneration – 'Chicken',
'Horse' and 'Bee' gods.

Thus, Christian icons became the object of pagan worship. Note that both the Englishman and the Russian clergy criticised the designation as 'gods' not of the saints themselves, but of their *icons*. Only the Englishman slightly confused cause and effect: the Russian
'poor people' did not believe there were many gods because they mistook Orthodox images for gods, but rather called the icons 'gods' because they had only recently been polytheists. Their idols had merely been given Byzantine names, and the masks carved from wood or stone had been replaced by faces painted on boards. And even then, not always and not everywhere. On several occasions, ethnographers encountered 'chicken gods' not in the form of fetishes or icons, but as actual idols – a stone head or a wooden human figurine. It is particularly curious that one such idol, bearing the strange name of Boglaz, was venerated in a village near Moscow (!) right up until the beginning of the 20th century (!). Priests at that time were on the hunt for Russian idols – just as their colleagues in the Kama region were after the Udmurt 'vorshuds' – forbidding parishioners, on pain of excommunication, from telling their children about them. However, the most devoted worshippers kept the idols of the 'chicken god' hidden away in chests. This was at the beginning of the 20th century!

And *when* did this change take place, when did the village deities take on the names and faces of Christian saints? Here, the names of the village 'bee gods' Zosima and Savvatiy come to our aid. The fact is that these saints lived and were canonised in the 15th century. It is hard to imagine that a matter as important to the new faith as beekeeping – I think there is no need to explain in detail the role and place of wax candles in the Orthodox liturgy! – could have remained for so long without a Christian patron, even if only in name. And whilst

Vlasiy or Modest might have turned out to be the ‘god of cows’, and Mamant shared the care of the sheep with Anastasia, then as far as the ‘gods of bees’ were concerned there was no dispute whatsoever – Zosima and Savvatiy, and only they! It follows, then, that the period when the village pantheon took shape – the time when the gods of the Russian village took refuge behind the names and images of Orthodox saints – was no earlier than the 15th century. This conclusion is supported by a number of indirect pieces of evidence. Firstly, the earliest references to icons being called ‘gods’ date, as we have seen, to the 16th century. Secondly, it was precisely to this era that the calendar scholar V. Vlasov attributed the convergence of the folk, agricultural calendar with the ecclesiastical one. And it was precisely in the fifteenth century that Cardinal d’Éli made a most intriguing observation: ‘The Russians had blended their Christianity with paganism to such an extent that it was difficult to say which predominated in the resulting mixture: Christianity, which had absorbed pagan elements, or paganism, which had swallowed up Christian doctrine.’ For all the bias of such a judgement, it perfectly reflects the worldview of the old Russian village, where prayer (precisely prayer, as it was called and clearly distinguished from incantations and spells!) could be addressed both to Christ and the saints, and to the leshy and the ovinnik; where the saints were honoured with the sacrifice of bulls and dancing, whilst the house spirits were greeted with the sign of the cross; where icons were anointed with blood and church censers were waved before stone idols; where a protective circle and foul language were considered a more reliable defence against evil spirits than the sign of the cross and prayer; where the notion of the world’s created nature, its fundamental separateness from the Creator, had, it would seem, simply gone unheard; where, finally, contrary to Moses’ first commandment and the first line of the Orthodox Creed, the Mother of God (whom they identified with the Earth and Paraskeva Pyatnitsa, and in incantations sometimes mentioned three Mothers of God, none of whom was the Mother of God) was venerated alongside Christ, and at times even pushed Him into the background, as the ‘absent God’ of pagan cults, the Mother of God (who was identified with the Earth and Paraskeva Pyatnitsa, whilst in incantations three Mothers of God were sometimes mentioned, none of whom were called Mary), ‘God Ilya’,
‘Russian God Nikola’, ‘Kasian-God’ – and a host of village gods, which are discussed in this article.

Two further questions remain to be addressed. Firstly, the original names of the village gods. I fear these have now been irretrievably lost. In Kaluga, at the beginning of the last century, a certain horse god

Khoroyar, a name equally reminiscent of both Flora-Lavra and the Baltic Haurirari. Some researchers believe that Avsen – Ovsyen, Tausen, Bausen, Usen, etc.—mentioned in Russian folklore in connection with horses—is in fact the Russian deity corresponding to the Baltic Usinsh and the Indo-Aryan Ashvins. That, I suppose, is all. The name of the Moscow Region's chicken god, Boglaz, is very unclear—was this the specific name of the idol, or of the deity itself? Could this be a corrupted form of 'God Vlas', i.e. Vlas in the guise not of a guardian of livestock in general, but specifically of chickens? In any case, for want of a better explanation, we may accept this rendering of the name. As for the patrons of sheep, pigs and bees, there is no mention of them at all. S.D. Domnikov, who identified certain prince-brothers, Diyulel (Diyules) and Didilad (Valadakh, Didalakha), from a late Russian chronicle as the pagan predecessors of Zosima and Savvatiy—allegedly deified for their involvement in the beekeeping trade—appears to have been mistaken. The names of the 'princes' were borrowed into the Russian chronicle from Polish sources. There, they arose from a misinterpretation of the ritual refrain 'dido-Leli', or
'dido-Lada', where 'dido' comes from the Lithuanian 'didis' – meaning 'great' – whilst Lada and Lelya are the names of Slavic goddesses. Thus, these names are indeed related to Slavic paganism, but by no means as 'bee gods'.

Finally, the last question—a very subtle one, lying somewhere on the edge of what can be ascertained by scientific methods, and for adherents of the 'scientific worldview'—which has deified the instrument of knowledge—entirely beyond the scope of any discussion. To WHOM, in fact, were the veneration and sacrifices of the baptised worshippers of village gods bearing Christian names actually directed? In other words, WHAT does their cult actually constitute – paganism beneath a thin veil of Christian names and symbols, or Christianity that has incorporated pagan traits and beliefs? This question, as Cardinal d'Éli himself noted, is extremely complex and obscure. And yet, a few words on this subject can and must be said. Firstly, the traditional faith of the Russian countryside in the 15th–19th centuries was just as much Orthodoxy as Haitian Voodoo or Brazilian Santeria is Catholicism. Secondly, it is interesting to note that it was precisely in the 15th century – more specifically in 1448 – that the Russian Church severed ties with the Church of Constantinople, which had entered into union with the Catholics; from then on, the metropolitan was elected rather than appointed by the patriarch.

But the Church is not merely some sort of administrative body, and the appointment of a metropolitan had not only, nor primarily, an administrative significance, but rather a mystical one – it was through this that the transmission of apostolic grace took place. Thus, it was precisely when the transmission of Christ's grace in Russia ceased that 'rural Orthodoxy' flourished. And it was precisely the adherents of this peculiar worldview who bore the weight of the Muscovite Tsardom (which was rising to prominence at that time) and the Russian Empire; who built churches, went on military campaigns, annexed Siberia and the Far East, and fought to the death on the battlefields of the Time of Troubles, the Great Northern War, and the Patriotic War of 1812. It was precisely this 'Orthodoxy' – and not the Orthodoxy of stone cathedrals and the Holy Synod, the Bible and the Church Fathers – that was the true religion of the overwhelming majority of the Russian people until the beginning of the 20th century.

And finally, thirdly, this very state-sanctioned Orthodoxy harboured no illusions regarding its rural 'namesake', and as early as the first centuries of its existence set out its attitude towards it in the eighth chapter of the famous *Domostroi*: 'How can the Church of God be reconciled with pagan idols? What fellowship can the faithful have with the unfaithful? What harmony is there between Christ and the devil? (…) Those who practise sorcery and witchcraft, even if they utter the name of the Holy Trinity, even if they make the sign of the Holy Cross of Christ – they must still be shunned and avoided."

These are not conclusions. They are merely food for thought. Let each person draw their own conclusions.

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Appendix II
Bogatyr – Towards an Understanding of the Word

The word ‘bogatyr’ has become firmly established in the Russian language. We speak of ‘bogatyr-like health’ and ‘bogatyr-like strength’, and we call any strong and healthy person a ‘bogatyr’. The origins of this word lie in the Russian heroic epic, the bylina. As recently as a hundred and fifty years ago, any Russian who used the word ‘bogatyr’ clearly meant to compare someone to the epic defenders of the Holy Russian Land – be it Suvorov’s ‘miraculous bogatyrs’ or the ‘bogatyrs, not you’ of the hero of Lermontov’s *Borodino*. Gradually, however, the meaning of the word has, as it were, become blurred – but this is a common occurrence in the history of language. Who now remembers that ‘to object’ used to mean ‘to respond to a blow with a blow’, or that ‘to stun’ meant ‘to strike a helmet’? Who, when firing, say, a starting pistol, would stop to think that to ‘fire’ without an ‘arrow’ is rather strange? I think very few.

Dictionaries usually explain this word as a Tatar loanword. On the one hand, it sounds convincing – after all, there really are similar words in the Tatar language, and indeed in Turkic and Mongolian languages in general – ‘bagatur’, ‘bogotur’, ‘baator’ and so on. And in Russian sources, the word only appears after the Mongol invasion, and specifically in relation to the Tatars. Thus, they mention Bedyay the bogatyr, the commander of Batu – this is Subudai, familiar to every reader of Yan and Chivilikhin, whose name our chroniclers reinterpreted in their own way, just as centuries later they played on the name Bonaparte – as if to say, ‘The Unburnt One’ (Napoleon) entered Moscow, and ‘The Burnt One’ left it. And so the enemy who brought DISASTER to Russian lands was interpreted as Bedyay.

It would seem that everything is clear – but no, not quite. Firstly, it is precisely among the Tatars that this word sounds quite unlike the Russian ‘Bogatyr’ – ‘batyr’. It was precisely in this form, without distortion, that it entered the languages of the tribes neighbouring the Tatars – the Udmurts and the Mari. Secondly, the fact that the word appeared in sources following the Mongol invasion prompts a counter-question: how many sources from the pre-Mongol era do we actually have? Not that there are many… given that our own chronicles

are copies from the 14th–15th centuries, as are the lives of the saints – with the possible exception of the Ostromir Gospel and Putyatin's Mineya, but these texts have no bearing whatsoever on the bogatyrs. Finally, very strong evidence against the Tatar origin of the word 'bogatyr' is the fact that it appears very early in Polish sources (bogatar, bogaterc, etc.), and specifically in this sense – 'warrior, hero'. After all, Poland had very little contact with the Tatars, being shielded from the Horde by Lithuania and the Russian principalities. And the occasional incursion by Tatar hordes into Poland, where they displayed almost as much cruelty as during their invasions of Rus', could have left – and did leave – little more than mournful verses such as 'they show no mercy to old or young; God's children perish in God's abodes'. Under such circumstances, the Tatar term for a warrior could only have become a term of abuse – just as the word 'Litvin' had become a term of abuse in the northern Russian lands. And yet, as early as the 14th century, Polish sources mention the word
'bogatyr' in a wholly positive sense, applied to their own countrymen. Furthermore, the philologist and literary scholar Vadim Kozhinov points out that this word, in a form much closer to that found in the bylinas, appeared in Bulgar inscriptions as 'bogotur' (some of these bogoturs bear distinctly Slavic names – Slavna, for example). It also appears in this form in the language of the North Caucasian Ossetian tribe. But the Ossetians are not Turks; they are a tribe of Iranian linguistic origin, descendants of the Scythian-Sarmatian inhabitants of the steppes! It is worth noting that the first names of the Bulgar princes also have Scythian-Sarmatian origins – Kubrat, Asparukh. So, is it entirely possible that the word 'bogotur' too dates back to Scythian-Sarmatian antiquity? Indeed, the root 'bog' – also considered to be of Scythian origin – has long been identified in it.

And then I happened to find confirmation of this idea – in a place where I least expected it. In the mountain passes of the Hindu Kush live tribes who, not so long ago, remained (and perhaps still remain to this day) faithful to the gods of their ancestors. Their neighbours, devout Muslims from Afghanistan and Pakistan, call the mountain dwellers 'kafirs' – pagans. Incidentally, they are depicted in a film from the twilight years of the Soviet Union
Russian Rambo as allies of the main character against the insurgents. I do not know whether this is true or a figment of the screenwriters' imagination. I fear that the *universal humanists*—generously funded and armed by the Americans—

have long since eradicated the last pockets of the Aryan tradition in those parts. But even before the Second World War, the kafirs were alive and well, fighting on equal terms with their fanatical neighbours. The German researcher Karl Jettmar dedicated a book to them – which, incidentally, has been translated into Russian – entitled *The Gods of the Hindu Kush*. This book mentions warrior-shamans, similar to the Scandinavian berserkers – *the bagadurs*. Moreover, a bagadur's standing within the brotherhood depends directly on the number of Muslim heads he has brought to the clan's sanctuary – how can one not recall our Alyosha Popovich, Ilya Muromets, Mikhailushka Ignatyevich and other bogatyrs, who would solemnly bring to a bogatyr outpost or a princely court the head of Tugarin Zmeevich, Zhidovin or Tsarish Ulanish, impaled on a spear? Yet there have never been any such Tatars in the Hindu Kush mountains! And it is all the more implausible that the pagan mountain-dwellers should have borrowed such a sacred word from their bitter enemies – the Turkic Muslims. It remains to be added that the Kafirs, like the Scythians and the Ossetians, belong to the Iranian language group.

The role of the Scythians and Sarmatians in the spiritual life of the Slavs has been noted on more than one occasion – think of Simargl, Khors, and even the very word 'god'. Perhaps this dates back to even more ancient times, when the distant ancestors of the Indo-Iranians – including the Hindu Kush Kafirs – inhabited the Northern Black Sea region. It is no coincidence that, until quite recently, the memory of the righteous 'rahmans' – Brahmins – was still alive in Ukraine. In any case, this Scythian-Sarmatian or ancient Aryan version of the origin of the word
'bogatyr' seems to me far more plausible than the explanation that the Russian people borrowed the name for the heroes of their epic tales—those very heroes who regarded it as their greatest feat 'not to leave the Tatars even a single seed'—from their enemies and oppressors, the Horde. It is more likely that the Turks and Mongols, having driven the Aryan nomads from the steppes of Eurasia, borrowed this word from them, along with many others.

And the fact that it appeared in sources only after the Tatars and was sometimes applied to them is also understandable – the Orthodox Church, which at that time controlled all written works, did not particularly distinguish between 'pagan' peoples. Consequently, in the 'Tale of the Battle of Mamai', Mamai prays to Perun and Khors, whilst the 'pagan' princes who, in the 14th–15th centuries, entered the service of the Muscovite sovereigns and were baptised,

despite their clearly Slavic names – Zhdan, Budimir, Yaroslav – appear in the genealogies of their descendants, the Russian nobility, as
'Tatars'. And so the Russian pagan word in the church chronicles came to refer to the Tatars. In pre-Mongol times, however, when the church was still weak, it simply tried to keep everything pagan under wraps, to avoid mentioning it unnecessarily.

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notes

Notes

1

There is a double twist here. Firstly, 10th-century Arabic sources do indeed mention the island of Rus, the homeland of the Rus people – evidently the Baltic island of Rügen. Secondly, on closer inspection, the island of Rus described by the cheerful co-authors turns out to be Madagascar – an island to which the Nazis, in the course of
the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question'. And in this fantastical farce by Burkin and Lukyanenko, it is precisely this island that becomes a reservation for anyone with even a drop of Russian blood in their veins. Isn't that ridiculous? Strange… Mind you, I don't find it funny either, dear reader. But they certainly do.

2

The most amusing thing is that there really was a similar episode in the Great Northern War, when the defenders of one of the Swedish fortresses in the Baltic region attempted a sortie wearing their great-grandfathers' steel armour. Alas, their lack of familiarity with the weight of the armour made the Swedes sluggish; moreover, the Swedes of the Modern Era turned out to be larger than their medieval ancestors, and the armour both pinched them and left them with exposed areas, with the result that the hapless 'knights' were partly cut down on the spot by Russian bayonets and partly taken prisoner. But whether this episode had any connection whatsoever to the Cossack legend, or whether it was merely a coincidence, I cannot say.

3

That said, folk ‘Orthodoxy’ is, in general, an extremely interesting phenomenon – see, for example, the article ‘The Village Gods of “Orthodox” Rus’ in the appendix.

4

Ibid. The second layer of meaning reconstructed by the researchers – concerning the allegedly necessary assistance provided by the mikula (i.e. the communal militia) to the volga (i.e. the prince's druzhina) in collecting tribute from the subjugated tribes – appears no less far-fetched. The idea that the druzhina was less combat-effective than the militia is not supported by anything other than references to the works of one of the co-authors. Nor can it be substantiated, as it contradicts both the sources (we see how Vyshatich, with twelve youths, disperses three hundred community militiamen without suffering any losses) and common sense – why, then, would a druzhina be needed at all?

5

This issue was examined by B.A. Rybakov in his work *Herodotus' Scythia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1979). See also his *Kievan Rus'…*, pp. 18–30. 'Paganism in Ancient Rus'. pp. 39–68. Despite the persuasiveness of his arguments against classifying the 'Scythian' ploughmen as actual Scythians, it is hardly possible to classify them as Slavs, as Rybakov does. As Rybakov himself repeatedly emphasised ('Kievan Rus…', pp. 19–21; 'Paganism in Ancient Rus', pp. 40, 64, 66–68), Herodotus' 'Scythian' ploughmen interacted actively with the Hellenes. If they had been Slavs, it would be impossible to explain why the Hellenes' self-designation only entered the Slavic languages very late, via written sources, and why all Slavic languages refer to this people by their Roman name, 'Greeks'.

6

These are intriguing observations which, unfortunately, have not been properly developed – see Plisetsky, M.M. Historism… pp. 202–206. See also Prozorov, L.R. 'Peasants in the Bylinas of the Kyiv Cycle: The Historical Reality of a Folkloric Term' // Sixth Russian University-Academic Scientific and Practical Conference: Proceedings. Izhevsk: UdGU Press, 2003. pp. 64–65.

Despite the ‘fantastical’ nature of this people, it is worth bearing in mind two circumstances: firstly, Paul the Deacon himself mentions ‘dog-men’ amongst the Lombards themselves, which researchers interpret as a reference to bands of ‘werewolves’ (Cardini, F. The Origins of Medieval Chivalry. Moscow: Progress, 1987. pp. 117–118.), and the Saxons called the Slavs ‘dogs’, which cannot be interpreted as a mere derogatory nickname, since the Saxons were part of the same tribal confederation as the Slavic Velets, and the Saxon nobility did not disdain intermarrying with Slavic women.

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